THE ELDER'S PEOPLE

Charming Stories of New England Life by

HARRIET PRESCOTT SPOFFORD

LADIES-IN-WAITING

BY

Kate Douglas Wiggin

In this volume Mrs. Wiggin brings together five of her most characteristic and enjoyable short stories. Some of the titles are familiar to magazine readers, and all of the heroines, whether they belong to town or country, have a common bond of sympathy in the waiting which fell to their lot. The stories are "Miss Thomasina Tucker," "The Turning Point," "Huldah the Prophetess," "Two on a Tour," and "Philippa's Nervous Prostration." They have the author's familiar good qualities, her fascinating art, her bright and natural conversation and her very entertaining humor.

"Ladies-in-Waiting" will get a hearty welcome from all who enjoy good fiction.

O. P. sent to R. R. L. 9/28/32

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The Elder's People

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LALLY (*page* 214)

THE ELDER'S PEOPLE

By

HARRIET PRESCOTT SPOFFORD

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THE DEACON'S WHISTLE

THE ELDER'S PEOPLE

I

The Deacon's Whistle

I S'POSE you heered Steve Manners is back ag'in, Marthy," said the caller, a little, dark woman, bristling with life and spirit, and alive to the tips of her hair. Steve Manners had once said of her that she would have been hung for a witch two hundred years ago.

"Yes," said Marthy, a long, lean woman, looking in her gray gingham like the shadow of some one else. "'A bird o' the air shell carry the voice an' that which hath wings shell tell the matter,' an' ev'ry dog in town knows it, soon 's he 's come. Elder Perry ses thet w'enever things gits runnin' to his mind in this perrish in comes Steve Manners an' his dog an' upsets the hull bilin'," continued Marthy, lifting her foot from the treadle and stopping the hum of her wheel.

"Lemme see. It 's mos' twenty year, ain't it, sence Steve fust come tellin' abeout w'at he called life? I was jes' startin' out tailorin' an' nussin'?"

"There did n't seem ter be a mite o' harm in the feller, though, as I rekerlek," said Marthy, smoothing down her soft gray hair with both hands.

"Wal, he jes' bewitched folks 'ith his talkin' an' his smilin' an' his singin'. He knowed all the songs 't ever was sung, an' his voice was like a bee in a flower —"

"An' them thet he did n't set all by the ears fer gilt saloons an' dice-throwin' an' hoss-racin' hankered fer the wild Injin life an' the buffalo-hunts an' bear-fights he telled on."

"I guess he 'd seen 'em all, Marthy. He was allus breakin' off work an' a-trompin' up an' down. No, there warn't a mite o' harm ter him — he was jes' a sorter travelin' minstrel show."

"Some of 'em what went off ter the city that fall never come back," said Marthy, her voice always as melancholy as the sighing of an autumn wind.

"My grief, Marthy! You can't lay everythin' ter Steve. He hed n't no idee o' the mischief he 's set afoot or he would n't be comin' back wunst in so often. He 's tellin', this time, o' the way they don't do no weavin' nor spinnin' down tu Salt Water, nor make their own sassingers, an' buys their cloes ready made. It 'd orter give the wimmin-folks time ter breathe down there, ef it 's true. Sort o' missionary work he 's done this trip."

"I do' know, Sally. Seems ter me turrible up-settin'."

"I 'd ruther like it now. Gimme time ter call my soul my own."

"P'r'aps."

"I'd lose my advantages goin' from house ter house. I should n't hear a speck o' news ef I stayed tu hum the way you do, Marthy. I should n't a-heered Steve tellin' — "

"Small loss."

"He 's reel interestin'. How many year is it sence Reuel follered him? Three? I thought it might be about three. An' no word fum him sence. W'at do ye s'pose he 's a-doin' of?"

"Eatin' husks. 'St! There 's his father a-settin' on the porch."

"You don't think he heered? I guess I 'll be goin'. I see Eunice ter meetin'," Sally added in a lower tone. "She 's aged consider'ble. She 's lookin' dretfle peakid. She 's a-goin' down inter a sickness or I don't know signs. Pretty creetur. Allus put me in mind of a flower — one o' them flowers ye tech 'ith a pin an' they shet up."

"I guess happiness would bring her good looks back," said Marthy. "I did set by her." And she looked drearily out of the window, not all the soft gleams sent over the long uplands before the sunset making the world bright to her.

"Mebbe. But land! they 're sech a shif'less lot, them Dows. The wimmin never gits their work done till nex' day, an' the men never gits it done at all. I can see Jerry Dow now, a-plantin' terbaccer an' yams an' pineapples in his garding 'stid o' corn an' cabbages. Wunst I seen him plantin' date-stones.

Sed he 'd liketer grow palm-leaf fans. His thoughts is mostly off in the islands o' the sea. The monkey he got died arter a w'ile, but there 's a parrot there, swears in Spanish enough ter make yer blood run cold. But Eunice hes ter take keer on it. Lor! he don't take keer o' nothin'! I don't wonder he" — with a sidelong nod towards the porch — "did n't want Reuel ter git a wife in that land o' Nod!"

"He felt 't would 'a' ben the ruin o' the boy."

"Might 'a' ben the savin' o' *her!*"

"That warn't his consarn."

"I heered say ol' Jerry Dow got the better of him in a land sale — "

"'T ain't likely."

"No, 't ain't. Jerry Dow never got the better o' anythin', not even his own bad ways."

"He was jes' sech another as Steve Manners."

"With the vim left out, an' th' interest in his feller creeturs. Yes, ef it hed n't er ben fer his limp he 'd 'a' gone trompin' along 'ith Steve.' T would 'a' jes' suited him."

"How you talk!"

"Gospel truth. Wal, I for one would n't blame him. I 've thought, many 's the time," — peering round to make sure no one heard, — "that I 'd like ter go the same road myself. You du git so pesky tired o' the same thin' day in an' day out. I never blamed Reuel a speck; excep' for leavin' Eunice."

"Leavin' Eunice!" cried the indignant Marthy, all her length of scant, clean gingham agitated. "An' there's his father!"

"I guess his father's stood it. He's made o' flint, that man."

"Oh, you don't know him — you don't know him!"

"Marthy, you would n't rekernise Ole Harry ef you wuz ter meet up 'ith him. You 'd find excuses for him. You allus did — fer the boy thet was licked, an' fer the man thet did the lickin'. Fer Reuel, an' fer Reuel's father. You know Elder Perry dealt with Deacon Asher fer his hard feelin's w'en he tore the leaf 'ith the boy's name on 't out'n the big Bible, out'n the hymn-book in the pew, and said 't warn't ter be spoke in his hearin'."

"Certi'n. An' he sent the Elder a bar'l o' cider an' a two-year-old heifer, a little w'ile arterwards. Yes, he ses ter Elder: 'You can come 'tween me an' my Heavenly Father. That 's w'at yer for. But you can't come between me and my son. Ef I had a son. But I ain't.' An' he ris up straight as George Washington. You 'd never 'a' thought his heart was mos' broke. I mind the night now — the buckwheat-field was all w'ite, an' low down there was a w'ite mist on the medders, an' there was a great moon in a shroud, an' the hull world seemed a-swimmin' in that w'iteness, an' I felt as ef Reuel was drownded in it — an' I 'd carried him in my heart sence his

mother put him in my arms. An' I see the Deacon bound ter everlastin' torment — an', dear knows, I 'd 'a' saved him ef walkin' barefoot over corn-stubble 'd 'a' done it. But there! I can't talk about it." And the trembling voice trembled into silence.

"Wal, you ain't no call ter talk. You ain't never done so much talkin' as the mouse the owl was arter. An' I guess I 'll say good-day, anyway. I'm goin' up ter Mis' Dow's. I'm afeard somebuddy 's sick up there. I 'll lay most anythin' it 's Eunice, an' I 'd better be on the spot before Mis' Mahala Brooks senses it. I like ter hev my own way," said Sally, tying her bonnet-strings with a jerk.

"I see the wash warn't out."

"Lor! That ain't no sign there."

And Marthy, looking after her gossip, saw not one but a dozen little figures crossing the brook and going up the hill, for her eyes were only two big tears. And then she turned and went about the buttered toast and picked fish for the Deacon. "Oh, I wonder w'at Reuel 's got fer supper," she sighed, as she cut the custard-pie.

Deacon Asher sat in the porch, the cat stretched along his knee. He had been reading the "Weekly Poulterer"; but it did not interest him; nothing interested him. His head had fallen, and as he gazed abroad over the fields through his huge horn-bowed spectacles all things looked dark and dim and vague. His other hand lay upon the cat; not in a caress —

merely as it were by accident. But the cat understood.

Within, Marthy's thin voice monotonously piped an old hymn; but it piped to the spirit ditties of no tune, for consciously he did not hear it. He heard above the burden a sweet young voice that sang at twilight to a baby crooning after it in an indistinguishable sweetness. He heard a child's glad cry saluting the early sun; he heard a boy's clear clarion call as he drove the cattle over the hill on a misty morning, all the green world, the white air washed with dew. And then the voice was a man's, low and tender, when he himself was burning up with pneumonia. And he heard it again, low and contained, but full of wrath, the night Reuel walked with Eunice Dow and he came between them with a thrust. The girl was looking pindling last Sabbath. Three years make some alterations. Three years? Mighty! Three eternities!

Another music began to mingle with the Deacon's thoughts, clear as bird-singing, a singular reedy whistle that seemed to give both parts in one; a very different thing from Marthy's melancholy strain, — a hymn-tune, indeed, but a gay and lilting one, full of runs and flourishes: "Come, my beloved, haste away." And then an alert and slender man, brown as a berry and wrinkled as a frozen apple, was coming up the field, carrying a long staff and followed by a yellow mongrel cur that, sitting down,

threw back his head and began to howl, as if singing in sympathy rather with Marthy's tune than with his master's.

"That 's my dog Bitters," said the man. "I named him Bitters fer the bark an' w'ine there is in him. Queer thin'," he went on, as he seated himself on the lower step of the porch, "but I can't w'istle no higher 'n I can sing. Useter think ef my voice gin eout I 'd hev the w'istle lef'. But I guess they 'll go together. Ain't much fun in livin' on arter ye 've los' yer w'istle — excep' w'en ye've paid tew dear fer it. P'r'aps," he said, glancing up into the Deacon's face with a cheerful smile, "you 've sometimes paid tew dear fer yourn."

The Deacon looked down as he might have looked on a little gnome or troll that had stepped from the brown furrow to his plough, as if he only half believed he were there, and so inferior a thing could be of no consequence. And he made no reply.

"A w'istle," said the other, "is one thin' ter you, Square, an' mebbe another ter me. Fer me — ter fust — it meant freedom, jes' freedom. No school, no work, no shackles; an' I took ter the road. I done a job w'en I wanted ter, an' I dropped it where it wus w'en I wanted ter. I went out in the worl' an' I see life. But sometimes life 's like that book in Revelations, pleasant in the mouth an' bad as thoroughwort arterwards. I done consider'ble rovin', slep' inside a stack, in the mow, 'mong the

sweet-breathed critters, anywheers. I helped myself to the bite an' sup when need was — 't warn't his'n any more 'n mine. There was times, cert'in, w'en I thought I 'd like it diff'runt. I 'd settle down, I said; I 'd hev a home, an' a wife an' childern there. Then I 'd come back up here an' look at Sally Moss. My lord! I was in chains! I was on fire! I lit out ag'in. I laid all night in the open pastur' unner the stars, like a part o' the old 'arth. I grabbed the truss an' swung in unner the trucks an' hed my long railroad rides, an' enjoyed the resk as much as a hoss does goin' inter battle. I made me a house o' hemlock-boughs, an' let the snow cover it, an' made my bed there a winter long. I hed n't a care. I lived my life. An' I found it good. No, I ain't ever paid tew dear fer my w'istle — though w'en I see Sally Moss a-risin' the hill jes' now, light as a bubble, I felt as ef p'r'aps I hed. P'r'aps I ain't come ter payin' yet — though I 've hed chilblains an' rheumatiz an' gone hungry. Anyways, I 've hed my way. But I guess 't ain't jes' the same 'ith you, Deacon," said the man, scratching Bitters's back with the end of his staff. "Your w'istle was ter hev your own way tew. Ter hev it ef the sky fell. I won't say ef all hell stood in the way — you 're Deacon Asher, an' I 'm usin' respettable language. Ter walk rough-shod over everybody ter git it. Ter tread yer son inter the dust, ter come 'tween him an' his gel, ter make the bitter outside world sweeter ter him than his father's house.

An' he 's found it bitter, you 'd better believe! Ter lay back an' never give no sign an' wait fer him ter come cringin' back — an' he 'll die unner a fence fust. There ain't nobody, 'less it 's Miss Mahala Brooks, darst ter speak up ter ye. It 's redic'lous. Down where I 've ben there 's them could swaller ye whole an' not know it any more 'n ef you wus one o' them durned vinegar flies. Ye 've needed somebody to speak the truth ter ye. I don't s'pose the Elder rastles 'ith ye; — can't say much ter the man thet cushions yer seat in the meetin' hus. Ye 've needed somebody that don't keer a tinker, an' now ye 've got it. Fer I ain't got nothin' ter lose, ye see. I 'm foot-loose an' free. An' I knowed the folks yer boy 's ben a-fore-gatherin' with, an' ef ye don't look out fer him soon he 'll be a goner. Ye 've blotted him out 'n yer fambly Bible, an' ye 're blottin' him out 'n the Book o' Life. Yes, sir, w'ile you be a-settin' up yer rights as a father, an' all the rest, ye 've ben a-murderin' a man, body an' soul, an' that man yer own son!"

Deacon Asher put down the cat, who had for some time been the size of two cats as she watched Bitters; and he rose without looking at this thing again, and went into the house, and shut the door behind him. He did not know why he had not gone in before; whether the man held him with his glittering eye, or whether because it did not become him to be roused.

"So long," said Steve, looking after him with a gay twinkle. "Wal, I soaked it ter ye good, any-

ways," he added. And picking up his tune where he had dropped it, "Fly like a youthful hart or roe," he went down the slope, followed by Bitters, singing after him with uplifted throat, according to his light, in a melancholy whine.

Perhaps it was the moonlight pouring into the Deacon's room that hindered his slumber that night. Usually sleeping the sleep of the just and the weary as soon as his stout muscles relaxed their tension, now his pillow seemed full of thorns. He thought Marthy never would go to bed; the whip-poor-wills over in the cranberry-swamp were like imps of darkness; and then the ticking of the friendly old clock in the kitchen, when all the house lay in dead silence, was like the accusing voice of a judge. His mind was in as much disquiet as his body. It was not merely that he had been insulted by a ribald tramp who whistled hymn-tunes as if for dancing in a barn; but, like a poisonous breath clouding a clear draught, doubts of the sturdy virtue that had been his pride rose within him, and tremors, whether of shame or fear, filled him with unrest. When by and by he dreamed, perhaps it was the beating of his angry heart that made the low thud, thud in his ears, like the rocking of the small wooden cradle that he remembered a light foot swinging in time to a sound half song, half just a happy murmur, all presently resolving itself now into the chorus of bird-singing at the dawn.

There was mowing to do that day — not much; for the Deacon had fallen into the way of selling most of his grass standing. It vexed him now, looking at the broad fields, to remember the men swinging their scythes in rhythmic measure, laying the long swaths behind them, the bobolinks starting from their nests, the fragrance of the fallen windrows, and all the busy bright morning commotion. He did not let himself think how different it would have been if Reuel were at home. He had put all that out of mind.

The day was breaking through the dusk of dawn with a dewy flush that made it seem as if earth and air with all their winds and sweetness were just newborn. The Deacon would have time to mow a good bit of the near field, which he had reserved to himself, before milking and the chores. He flung his scythe across his shoulder and strode on. He had some dim wonder if heaven itself were anything fairer than this hour; but a thought as dim behind it told him there could be no heaven without love, — and who in all the universe held any love for him! Possibly — it was a new thought to the Deacon, and a staggering one — he did not deserve to be loved. He knew very well that there had been no love in his heart for God or man in the blackness of these three long desert years. It had been bad enough when his wife was taken — the tender brooding dove; but he had submitted after a time, — he

had his boy. And then the Deacon stifled a convulsive sigh and shifted his scythe and went on. He paused at last, somewhat dismayed to see that the wind and rain of a midnight shower had lodged the grass, and then his thoughts were arrested by the sight of a little figure running in his direction and waving her arms wildly.

It was Sally Moss. "Oh, Deacon! Deacon Asher!" she was crying. "Come here, come over here an' help her. It 's the Dows' little Jersey 't Eunice bought up, an' the dogs were worryin' her calf, an' she got the calf behind her, an' now they 're pullin' her down. Elder's dog an' your Bose an' Steve Manners's Bitters. She 's got atween 'em an' her calf an' so they 're a-tacklin' her!"

The Deacon was a man of might in thew and sinew; he caught hold of the handles of his scythe more firmly and ran along with her as she turned, till they came upon the scene of struggle; and he gave Bose a kick that threw him out yelping, and with both hands and a will laid the flat of his blade across Bitters's back, and sent the Elder's dog after Bose, and let the harassed cow go free.

"I was a-settin' up 'ith Eunice Dow — she 's fearful sick," said Sally, catching her breath, and her eyes sparkling. "You git kind o' tired towards mornin', an' you look out'n the winder ter the stars thet 's failin', for the fields that grows gray an' wakin', for the sun-up, or settin' ter keep yer eyes

open. She 's down 'ith a reel bad spell o' fever. I knowed she was a-fittin' fer it Sabbath, and I fixed thin's so 's I could be on hand. I do' no ef she 'll git over it or unner it. But she will ef cold water can du it! An' I see the critter. I was scared o' the dogs — but I hed ter help her, the poor mother-thin' a-fightin' fer her child. I 'd like ter see the father-critter'd 'a' done that. Seems ter me fathers are made of diff'runt cloth from mothers. There 's you!" cried Sally, turning on him with a sudden fury. "You promised Mary you 'd look out fer Reuel. How ye done it? An' there 's Miss Dow workin' away 'ith me fer dear life over Eunice, an' he 's a-settin' 'ith his pipe down by the h'arth. I 'm boun' ter say he 's used up a hull card o' matches keepin' that pipe goin'. Eunice 's the mainstay o' the family. I learn'd her how, an' she can make buttonholes—" But Sally was talking to empty air, for the Deacon had snapped his fingers for Bose, and was stalking off to his mowing. The whole world had turned on him with fury lately.

"Wal," she said, "I guess I 'll make ye hark afore I git thru 'ith ye!"

Sally might not have been so positive if she had not known that where Bitters was Steve Manners was not likely to be far away, and if she had not, in fact, seen him plodding up the hill with his staff — the Dows' house being one of his stages. Sometimes, where it is a question of keeping one's balance, a

thread, that would not bear the weight of a spider, if one can but touch it, gives support.

"Come, Bitters," called his master, "we 've got consider'ble of a stunt ter-day"; — and then his gay whistle stopped short, as he saw what had happened.

"Bitters!" he cried sharply, dropping his staff, and bounding up the slope and throwing himself on the wet grass beside the dog. "What is it?" he cried. "What 's the matter? Oh, Bitters, you 're all I got! Don't say you 're a-goin' back on me now! How come ye so? What in sin should I du 'thout you, Bitters!" The stump of a yellow tail stirred feebly. "Why, Bitters boy!" Steve cried, his voice breaking.

"Steve," said Sally, her own voice quavering, while she twisted her fingers till they hurt, "I 'm sorry I throwed you down that time."

"Oh, that 's no matter," Steve answered frankly. "Jes' tell me how in time did this happen? Here, you see w'at 's the matter! I can't. Why, Bitters is ben the same ter me as wife an' child an' all that, an' ef Bitters is ter die — " He laid his head on the dog's neck. "Don't ye leave me, Bitters," he whispered chokingly. "I — I could n't stand that." The dog raised his head a trifle and lapped his master's face, and Steve's voice broke down in a loud sob.

"Here," said Sally. "He 's a-comin' reoun. Deacon jes sorter stunned him. That 's all. He was a-pullin' down Euny's cow all right. You wanter git

even 'ith the Deacon? Then you leave Bitters here ter me, an' you go down an' find Reuel. Eunice said she'd die afore she'd merry him, 'ith the Deacon so sot; an' you tell him she's a-dyin'. P'r'aps that 'll fetch him."

"An' leave Bitters?" cried Steve, rising. "Not if I know it. Bitters an' I 've seen trouble together, but we 've allus sheered it an' allus will — won't we, ol' dog?"

Bitters struggled to his feet, shook himself, and gave a short and sharp reply.

"Wait, till I get him a bite o' suthin'!" said Sally, running up to the house that sat on its lonely hill, gray and dreary in the full morning light. But when she would have returned, Steve and Bitters were gone, whether Steve carried the dog or he followed; only a cheerful strain in the distance seemed to say that all was right.

"Wal, that 's fer here an' now," she said. "But herearter, ef Steve an' me don't go together, wing an' wing, an' see w'at them stars are made of, it 'll be becos I ain't fitten to keep up 'ith him, and I don' know 's I be. My! This ain't no way ter keer fer the sick."

Mrs. Dow was in the kitchen. "I ain't got any merlasses fer the coffee, Sally," she said. "An' the ceow's ben so put abeout she won't give down no milk ter-day. I do' know w'at we 'll du."

"We 'll play we like it jes' 's 't is," said Sally.

"Jerry with Eunice? Quiet there," listening a moment. "Then I guess I 'll dry my feet, though I do' know 's you 'd ketch cold in summer dew. Remember w'en we washed our faces in June dew fer the freckles? W'at fools gels be!"

Upstairs, Jerry was bending over the sick girl. "Don't ye know me, Euny?" he was whimpering. "Euny, don't ye know me? Can't ye speak ter me?"

"Pa — dear," she said, after a moment's silence, as if called back from a great distance.

"Ye ain't goin' fer ter die an' leave us, Euny, be ye? I do' know w'at ma 'n' me 'd du. You jes' make up yer mind ye won't. Makin' up yer mind 's a gre't thin'."

It was apparently too great a thing for the girl to do. Awake now, she was murmuring again excitedly, tossing her head from side to side, and presently calling out with strange incoherent cries. Sally, coming in swiftly and silently, seized the father by the shoulder, and, in spite of his limp, whirled him out of the room. "You ain't got sense enough ter scare an owl!" she exclaimed outside the door. "Jes' 's we'd got her quiet! Now you go fer the doctor, double-quick, an' then see ter thet cow! Lord! ef I 'd merried you, Jerry Dow, I 'd made a man o' ye!"

"Wal, ye did n't!" said the turning worm.

Sally went back, and let the bright breeze into the room, and bathed the girl's face with cold water, and found another pillow, and smoothed the sheets.

"Yes, Reuel," sighed the sick girl, "it 's a lovely night. I can smell the sweetbrier fum the swamp clear here. Oh, ma, I can't bear the smell o' that sweetbrier! Throw it in the fire, won't ye? W'at we got sech a hot fire for ter-day? Oh, that sweetbrier makes me think o' the night Reuel went off jes' becos — Why, Reuel! " — and her voice mounted higher and her words came more quickly — "you know there 's nobody in all the worl' — Oh, yes, I du, I du! But I can't leave 'em. I can't leave poor ol' pa. They could n't git along er tall. You must n't ask me. They don 't hev any sort of a good time — oh, yes, I du, 'ith you a-comin', an' you a-carin' fer me — oh, I don 't want anythin' better. W'y, evenin's when I 'm a-settin' on the doorstep 'ith you, an' the w'ite rose is in blow — Wunst you put a w'ite rose in my hair. I kep' the rose an' pressed it. I got it now. I love a w'ite rose, don't you? You said my hair was like corn silk — Oh, Reuel, Reuel, where be ye? Where you gone? I can't see, I can't hear, the world 's all black. Oh, Deacon Asher! Oh, he 's off — it 's my fault — folks ses — oh, folks ses he 's gone ter the bad! He could n't — no he could n't! But if he did, I sent him, an' Deacon Asher sent him! Oh, I should n't think you would — you was all the world to me, Reuel, Reuel — " And as the broken sentences became more rapid and indistinct, Sally began to think of cutting off the corn-silk hair.

The fever was higher the next day, and the delir-

ium wilder, an unceasing, low mutter, only one word in it, her lover's name, being now and again distinguishable. But by nightfall the strength was gone, and the sufferer lay in stupor or in deep sleep — it was not easy for the good country doctor to say which.

The nightfall had purpled into a dewy dusk, with the stars hanging out of it large as lamps, and the air full of wandering scents from the spice-bush, the balm, and the white roses, when the latch of the kitchen door lifted and a young man stepped in quickly.

"How 's Eunice?" he whispered, hoarsely. "Is she alive? Tell me! Is she alive? It 's me, Mr. Dow. Steve told me — good God, sir, she ain't —"

"I don't know," said Jerry without stirring, where he sat with his head against the bricks of the big oven. "Mebbe she is, mebbe she is n't. They keep me eout. W'en ye hear the cheers scrape back overhead, you 'll know cert'in. I 'm a-listenin'. W'en it ain't no use ter keep still, folks don't keep still any more. She 's all the gel I got." And the voice went babbling on wearily.

But the young man had already bounded up the stairs, noiseless as a cat, and was at the door of the room overhead, was in the room, was on his knees by the bed where the slender form lay shrunken and pitiful among the pillows. There was no sound in the room except now and then that of a low flutter-

ing breath and the tapping of the rose upon the blind.

Sally sat at the bed's head, erect, sparkling with nervous force, watching for the enemy she fought in the dark; but Mrs. Dow, worn out with grief and terror and fatigue, had dropped her head upon the quilt at the foot of the other side and slept profoundly. Perhaps an hour passed, while he still knelt there. Then Sally leaned forward and touched him with the tip of her finger. The girl had begun to stir. She touched him again before he lifted his haggard face. And with that she pointed at the window, and the blossoming branch looking in there. He stared at her wonderingly a moment, and then, through some unknown intuition, her meaning flashed upon him. He moved silently to the window and tore off spray after spray of the roses, and stripped them of their thorns, and shook them dry of dew, and brought them back and laid them in the hollow of the sick girl's arm, and in a few minutes their pungent perfume filled the small bare room.

Presently the rich, sweet breath penetrated the girl's consciousness, and, as if she were aware of their atmosphere, she opened her eyes and saw Reuel, and a heavenly smile kindled her face to its old beauty, before she lapsed back into the semi-stupor.

"Now," said Sally, "we gotter fight! You go downstairs, Reuel, quick meter. Wake up, Mis' Dow! It 's time ter hyper. Rub her feet, w'ile

I git the brandy. Three o'clock to-night 'll tell the story!"

Lyra and the great constellations wheeled slowly overhead, while Reuel walked up and down, up and down the path between the hollyhocks all night. Their cold sparkle seemed something indifferent, even hostile. What else could the power that set them in their place be to him? But Eunice — the lovely young thing who had never done wrong in her life! Far off, down by the coast, the dark sea was drawing its tides out and away to the great deeps. A dim sense of the mystery of sea and stars mingled with his pain. How infinitely far off he was from help! The cool dampness of the night blew about him, loaded with fragrance from farm and field, but it did not soothe the fever of his fear and his despair. At every turn in his walk he looked up with a sinking heart and a dull horror at the window's faint glimmer. And suddenly he fell on his knees; he did n't dare pray, he only murmured over and over: "She's sech a young thing! She never done wrong in her born days. She loves to live. Oh, Christ! She loves to live!" And then a step on the turf, and on his shoulder a hand whose touch for a moment seemed that of some messenger from far beyond. Perhaps it was; for Elder Perry, coming home from a death-bed at the other end of the settlement, had seen Reuel moving to and fro like a fierce shadow and had divined his trouble.

"You 've come back, Reuel?" he said. "That 's good. Perhaps that was an oath I heard; but I think the Lord takes it for a prayer —"

"Sh — sh!" whispered Reuel, struggling to his feet. "Oh, gol-durn them birds! They 'll wake her up!" For a sweet pipe remotely singing had been answered by a burst of music far and near.

"Then it will be best for her. There can't anything happen," said the low-voiced Elder, "that won't be best for her."

"But not for me," groaned Reuel.

"And for you, too. We can't any of us go so far in this universe as to escape God's love. I was feeling it pouring all about me as I walked over the hills."

"Oh, you!" said Reuel.

The morning star hung like a jewel melting into the gold-gray of the sky. To the Elder it shone like the forehead of some archangelic keeper of the gates of heaven, each a great pearl, with lambent lights below, roseate and golden, shadows of faint lavender and streaks of fire. But Reuel saw nothing of it; he saw a little dark figure flying down the path like a witch on a broomstick.

"It 's all right!" Sally was exclaiming, as soon as she was near enough to be heard just under her breath. "She 's woke up, an' took notice. She 's rekerlected you was there. She 's had a sup o' milk. No!" putting a hand like a grip of steel on Reuel's

arm. "Not on yer life! Ye can't see her yit. I would n't let you fer a farm."

Reuel stood a moment, bewildered, half stunned. And then his face quivered, the tears gushed out. "Oh!" he cried. "Oh, I want my father!"

Deacon Asher was standing on his porch drinking in the deliciousness of the morning without knowing it. He thought he was waiting for Marthy to settle his coffee. The birds were not yet silent, the bees were abroad and busy, the butterflies were swimming round the cinnamon-roses, the blue was burning overhead shot through and through with sunshine. "It 's a great haying-day," he said. "Great." But there was no satisfaction in the thought or in the tone. He looked across the wide fields, billowing with shadows of sailing clouds, and up at the bare and lonely little house on the hill where his enemy was in trouble. And then he saw some one dashing down the hill, across the brook, and up the long slope leading to his door. A pang, half like a tender reminiscence, half like a fresh and angry sting, struck through him like a shudder. And the next moment, the Deacon had sprung down the steps, and was plunging with leaps and bounds to throw his mighty arms about the boy who flung himself upon his breast.

"Oh, she 's goin' ter live, father! She 's goin' ter live!" cried Reuel.

"My son! My son!" the Deacon answered, clasping him closer and closer.

Marthy was at the window, the flashing of the sun on the milk-pans reflected in the tears on her face like a glory. "This won't never du," she said, flicking off the tears with her fingers as she went to the door. "I 'll be havin' 'em both down on my han's. Reuel, that you?" she said, lowering the key at once. "Wal, come right in. The coffee 's spilin'."

"Father," said Reuel, standing with his head bowed, "I done wrong."

"We 'll both on us do right, boy," said the Deacon. And they went in together.

A CHANGE OF HEART

II

A Change of Heart

SOMETIMES, in spite of himself, a smile would flash over Elder Perry's face, although he was in the pulpit, if he happened to catch his wife's eye.

Those of the congregation who felt they had no other way of getting to heaven than through the Elder's good offices thought the smile a beam of blessed light; those of the opposition wondered what ailed the man. But the opposition was very small, and usually contented itself with fighting Jonah's whale, and Genesis, and Kings in general.

But Mrs. Perry knew that in the instant of the smile the Elder's glance had fallen on Mrs. Means, with her little girl's head resting in sleep on her shoulder, suddenly glaring at Mrs. Warner as if she had just remembered how she hated her, and Mrs. Warner, with her little boy beside her, glaring back again as if she had hated Mrs. Means all along.

"Fact is," said Miss Mahala Brooks, "the two women each wanted ter hev t' other one's husband before they was married at all, an' did n't want the husband they did hev. Sounds awfle, don't it? They useter be thick as peas in a pod w'en they was gels — wore each other's gownds till you could n't tell

t' other from which. Puts me in mind of an old song:

> "'There 's some folks allers moans a bit
> About the man they did n't git,
> But I think we need n't make a fuss
> If the man we don't want did n't git us.'"

"Come, come, now, Miss Mahaly! I 'm surprised."

"An' there 's Thirzy, just as white an' delicate like as John Means was, an' Mis' Warner looking her over as ef she was fairly hungry for her an' could n't keep her hands off 'n her; an' there 's Jo growin' up the spit and image of Josiah Warner, tall an' straight, 'ith a black eye like a half-burned coal, an' Mis' Means stealin' looks at him an' feelin' he 'd orter to be hern. Sing'lar w'at made both them men die so early. 'T warn't becos they was mismated; for *they* was suited. Mis' Means might 'a' be'n a reel good wife ter the right one. As it was, I s'pose she done her duty — I do' know. But the black she put on fer John was beautiful. She give a good deal of attention to it, an' hemmed the crapes herself. Sometimes I thought — Josiah dyin' near the same time — that the black was reely more for Josiah. But you can't look inter people's feelin's. They kep' dark. On'y every Sabbath in the meetin'-hus you can see Mis' Means lookin' an' longin' at little Jo, an' Mis' Warner's face as good as sayin' that Thirzy 'd be'n stole in her cradle. 'T ain't as ef

they did n't keer for their own, eyther. Mis' Means loves her Thirzy to distraction — 'pears to; an' Mis' Warner useter raise the neighborhood ef Jo bumped his head. But they would n't miss goin' ter meetin' Sabbaths, rain or shine, so 's ter hate each other a little wuss, an' see them childern that looks so like their fathers. It 's kinder immoral. They don't speak, you know."

"All the same," said the Elder — he had but lately come to the place and was becoming acquainted with the people — "I am ashamed of smiling. I don't know how I could. It is tragedy. Four lives spoiled — "

"Oh, I guess Josiah an' John 's all right."

"Well, we must see what we can do for the others. It 's not wholesome to live in hate. Poisons the blood. I don't know, Miss Mahaly," he added presently, with a shrewd glance. "I hope we haven't been gossiping."

"Land, Elder! W'en you 've be'n in the woods as long as I hev, you 'll find it 's bread an' meat ter hear about folks!"

"Well, well," said the Elder, as he went his way, "it seems to be a need of human nature. Even the South Sea Islander has his Talking Man."

The cart path turned to the right across a piece of woods where the sun fell through the emerald depths in shafts of green light, and the good man offered thanks in his heart for the exceeding beauty of the hour. At the end of the path he found

Mrs. Warner sitting on her doorstep, shelling peas, while Jo was splitting kindlings at the chopping-block.

"He won't let me," said Mrs. Warner apologetically.

"I should hope not," said the Elder.

"Come right in, Elder," she said, bustling her peas out of the way. And the Elder found himself in a big room where the pine-wood walls had turned the color of a chestnut, and where patchwork quilts swung as curtains and partitions — a place full of golden-brown shadows, with an atmosphere, as the sun came in, half cheer, half melancholy.

"What handsome quilts!" said the Elder.

"P'r'aps they be, though I do say it," she replied, wiping off a chair. "I was pertic'lar about the pieces. I like ter keep it bright an' pleasant fer the boy. There ain't nothin' more heart'nin' than colors. W'en he gits big enough he means ter finish off the house inside. But as 't is, — you see."

"I see," said the Elder. "Pleasant. And how do you carry on the farm? It's a pretty big farm."

"Oh, on sheers. Deacon Harding works it by the halves. He thinks he 'd orter hev half the eggs, tew. But I drawed the line at eggs. Bime-by Jo 'll take it over himself."

"He's a fine boy."

"Ain't he now! An' he thinks his mother stood roun' w'en the world was made."

"He's about the age of little Thirzy Means, ain't he?"

"Who?" said Mrs. Warner, drawing herself up a trifle. "No. He's consider'ble older. Though I s'pose her mother 'll be for makin' Thirzy out younger 'n 's right. There ain't no dependence on Mis' Means."

"Thirzy's a nice child."

"Ef 't warn't fer her mother. But you can't make silk out'n cotton."

"I saw Mrs. Means at meeting. She didn't seem like that."

"No. You'd say butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. But you'll excuse me, Elder. I don't need ter hear nothin' about Mis' Means."

"I'm afraid," said the Elder, "that that isn't real Christian feeling."

"I know it. But I ain't no reason to love her. She kep' me out o' heaven here, and I s'pose she'll keep me out o' heaven there!"

"Poh! poh!" said the Elder. "Nobody can do that but you yourself. You'd better kiss and be friends, you two."

"There ain't no Judas in me. W'en I take a scut I speak right out. — Kinder warm, walkin' thru the woods. I'll fetch a tumbler o' rosb'ry s'rub. It's reel coolin'."

The Elder retraced his steps through the wood, a little downhearted. He was afraid he had a task

beyond his powers. As he crossed a swampy spot an exquisite perfume stole along the way, and he saw an azalea bush lifting its white blossoms beside him. He stopped to breathe the delicious air a minute. "Flower," he said, "you are preaching me a little sermon. Here you are, cut as fine as the fine rays of the stars of heaven, and hid in the forest, without fruit for bird and with little honey for the bee, just because the Lord loves beauty. And if He takes such care for you, fashioning you so delicately and sweetly, surely He will take as much for these troublesome souls of ours." And he went on, somewhat cheered by his fancy.

The Elder found Mrs. Means at the other end of the cart path. Her small house was half covered with trained honeysuckle and sweetbrier; she herself looked something like a withered honeysuckle flower. She was teaching little Thirzy to sew.

"I take this reel kind in you, Elder," she said. "Set right down, an' let me git you a palm leaf fan. I don't s'pose you 'd keer fer jes' a thimbleful o' my cherry bounce? It 's rether heatin'."

"No, no," said the Elder. "I had some shrub over at Mrs. Warner's." He saw Mrs. Means bridle and toss her head. "She has a hard time, the poor woman!" he said. "She is n't left so forehanded as some." And he glanced about the little room with its wax flowers and a chromo framed in shells.

"I guess she don't have no harder time 'n she

deserves," was the reply. "But we don't speak her name in this house, Elder. How 'd you find old Mis' Dacre? She 's been a long time steppin' acrost Jordan. Seems reely as ef she warn't willin'."

"Few of us are, Mrs. Means. It 's a beautiful world. Few of us are so ungrateful as not to be loath to leave it."

"Not fer those shinin' shores?" asked Mrs. Means, demurely. "I often set and ponder —"

"All in good time, Mrs. Means. All in good time. Perhaps when we 're fit and ready. How sweet your honeysuckle is!"

"You think so? It smells to me a little like ginger, and puts me in mind o' things cookin'. And I 'm sech a poor hand at my victuals —"

The Elder laughed. "Come here, Thirzy," he said then, "and let me hear that little hymn you were singing." And under her mother's beckoning nod and glance Thirzy repeated one hymn and then another and another, till, seeing that he had not time to hear the whole hymn-book, the Elder said goodbye.

Her mother took Thirzy in her lap and kissed her. "You did it reel pretty," she said. "You 're mother's dear. Mother learned them to you."

"You 're not very happy," said Mrs. Perry to her husband that evening, as they sat at their door looking down the dark glades of the wood in the starlight.

"No. I 'm what Miss Mahala would call low in my mind," he replied. "I don't see any way to take the venom out of the hearts of those two women."

"God will find out a way," she said, laying her hand on his arm. "With you helping Him."

"It 's a beautiful thing to feel that God calls on us to help Him, is n't it?" said the Elder.

But a few days later the Elder, walking again through the wood to the other side of his wide parish, saw at a distance through the green spaces what he might have taken for little wild woodland creatures of faëry. He paused to look, and saw Jo, with his trousers rolled above the knee, and Thirzy, with her skirts pinned up, dancing in the shallow brook and throwing the water over each other in shining handfuls, with shrieks of laughter. "I guess the Lord is doing it without help from me," he said, as he went on.

But if that were so, when a dozen years of the Elder's pastorate had gone there was no outward indication of it — only the two children, who had played together in the brook without their mothers knowing it, now looked at each other across the meeting-house, the young man with his bold, dark glance, and the other with the swift blush that answered it. But the mothers — Mrs. Means a little more like the withered honeysuckle flower than before, and Mrs. Warner almost nut-brown, and spar-

kling at every point with her electric force — sat up as defiant as ever. The sting and smart of the original wrong might have long since ceased, but the feeling it had made remained.

"Thirzy Means!" said her mother. "Who was that come home 'ith you fum meetin' to-night?"

"Why, mother —" making time by dropping her hat and picking it up again, the crimson of her face invisible in the dim room where her mother had been looking out behind the blinds.

"Who was it, Thirzy?" with an insistent tone there was no gainsaying.

"It was Jo."

"Jo who?"

"There is n't but one Jo. And there is n't but one Jo for me, mother, in all the world!" cried the girl.

"My land!" gasped the mother. "After all I 've be'n thru! After all I 've done fer you! Takin' the bread out'n my own mouth, an' makin' every gownd you ever hed — to hev it come ter this! Oh, you 're a-killin' me, you 're a-killin' of me!" And bursting into sobs, of which Thirzy, pained and bewildered, at first failed to take notice, Mrs. Means presently began to laugh, and then to scream, and then to sob and gurgle again. And all that Thirzy could do was to run for Miss Mahala, who happened to be the next neighbor, a quarter of a mile away.

"Oh, mother, mother!" cried Thirzy, coming back breathless, and finding her mother still beating the air. "Don't! dearest mother, don't! I did n't know — I don't know now — I did n't mean — I won't do nothin' you don't want me to do! I — I —" But Mrs. Means still sobbed and laughed and screamed and scuffled.

"Them high-strikes!" said Miss Mahala contemptuously. "There ain't nothin' so good for 'em as b'ilin' water. You jes' put some sticks an' paper an' a hull sheet o' matches together, Thirzy, an' git some water het scaldin'. We'll pour it down her throat ef we hev ter take a funnel!"

"Oh, where am I?" moaned Mrs. Means, through a subsiding sob. "What has happened? Oh, Thirzy, I do' know but what I'm a-dyin'. I'm a-dyin', — an' then you can hev things yer own way. Your poor old mother —"

"You're feelin' some better, Mis' Means," said Miss Mahala.

"P'r'aps so. A little mite. I don't think there'll be no need —"

"Oh, mother, I never meant — I won't —"

"You be still, Thirzy," said Miss Mahala, still holding the matches in her hand. "Don't go to makin' no promises —"

"Oh, but I never thought to see her so put about!" exclaimed Thirzy. "And Jo would be sech a good son to you, mother —"

Mrs. Means began to gasp again.

"Never mind, mother, dear little mother!" cried Thirzy, in an agony. "I 'll tell him to go! I will! But, oh, it will break my heart!" And then Thirzy was crying.

"Sakes!" said Miss Mahala. "Two on 'em on my han's. Thirzy! You stop! Leave off! You 've got more sense —"

"She 's promised," said Mrs. Means feebly. "You 've promised, Thirzy. An' you 've allers kep' your promises. Remember, you 've promised. I guess I 'll go to bed, ef I can make out to git there."

"I 'll help you, mother!" And with her arm about her mother, who swayed a little more than was necessary, Thirzy led her up the narrow stairs.

"I shan't be with you long," she said tearfully, as Thirzy helped her undress. "My own mother died at jes' my age. I mind how I felt about every triflin' thing I done. Though 't warn't much, I see now — for I mos' worshiped the groun' she walked on, an' it 's b'en a gre't comfort to me that I did. But I wanter spare you even thet. Kiss me, Thirzy."

"There! An' there, mother dear! An' I 'll tell Jo to go" — her voice breaking. And having bathed her mother's face in the Cologne water, kept this dozen years or more for show, and having shut out the moonlight and left her quiet and falling asleep, Thirzy went to see Miss Mahala safely to her own door.

"You can tell him to go," said Miss Mahala. "But it don't foller that he 's a-goin'. I 'll set the Elder onto her, an' then we 'll see. Yes, you may come halfway; not a step furder. It 's bright moonlight, an' there 's Elder's Tige barkin' to it. Thirzy — oncet I was jes' sech a fool as you be. An' it 's lef' me high an' dry an' alone. It 's nights like this brings it all back to me. The breath of the honeysuckle an' the wild rose ain't no sweeter 'n I thinked my life was ter be. There ain't no sense in breakin' two hearts fer one. Who 's that? Sakes alive, ef 't ain't Jo Warner! Lor', how you scairt me! Now, Thirzy, you go slow!" And Miss Mahala picked up her skirts and ran on as if Pharaoh, her cat, were expecting her and she must not keep him waiting.

"What 's the matter?" asked Jo. "What are you goin' slow about?"

"Oh, Jo! Mother — I 've had to promise mother — I — I thought she was dyin'," began Thirzy. And then, her knees failing, she sank upon the dry grass, hiding her face with her hands and weeping bitterly.

In a moment Jo had caught her up. "Thirzy, my love, my little wife!" he was whispering.

"Oh, no, I never can be that — I 've promised mother —"

"You mean you set more by her than you do by me!"

She knew, although she could not see, how his eyes flashed in the moonlight.

"Oh, no, no, never! It's diff'runt. She said I was killin' her. She said she was dyin'. I thought mebbe she was. She — she's my mother, you know."

"Dashed if I don't!" said Jo.

"An' I've promised her to tell you to go —"

"Go? You an' me can't part," he said, still holding her. "We're all the same as one. I would n't give a cent for life 'thouten the hope of you. An' you ain't a-goin' ter kill me tew, be ye?"

"Oh, I don't know w'at to do," moaned Thirzy. "Only — only you must go, Jo!" And she clung to him so that it was quite impossible for him to go.

"Here," said Jo. "Let's set down an' git quiet like." And side by side, with his arms about her, and her head upon his shoulder, they sat on a mossy log in the dusk of the trees and gazed now into the gloom of the green aisles, where the light fell on this leaf and on that, turning them into great white flowers, and now into the depths of sky where the moon sailed low. Far off the dogs of distant farms answered Tige and one another with faint bayings, and a bird trilled a snatch of song as if it woke from sleep and dreamed off again. And then it was so still they might have heard the dew gather.

They sat there till the spell of the dark and cool tranquillity entered their souls, and their lips clung together in long tender kisses.

"Now," said Jo, "you've told me to go. But I

belong to you an' you to me; an' we 'll stay content with that for a spell, an' give her time to think it over an' simmer down. An' then I 'll come an' talk 'ith her." And still in the shadow of the trees he watched her to her door.

"That you, Thirzy?" said her mother dreamily. "You see Miss Mahaly home? I've hed an awfle dream. I dreamt you was with Jo Warner in the wood —"

"I was, mother," said Thirzy. "An' I told him w'at I promised you I would. It did n't do any good."

"I should thought he 'd hed more sperrit. But — I guess he 'll come to it. I did n't expec' he 'd take it easy to fust. There, now, I can go to sleep elegant."

But Jo Warner never had the opportunity to talk with Mrs. Means. "You see," said Miss Mahala, as she and Mrs. Perry stood together, "a person can take a reel bad cold, ef 't is on a summer's night, a-hoppin' out'n a warm bed an' runnin' barefoot thru the dew, sorter spyin' like. An' Mis' Means hed n't no staminy, an' pneumony acts quick. Looks reel nat'ral, don't she? She 'd admire ter see herself. Pity. Thirzy 's all broke down nussin'. W'en Mis' Means was fust took, she ses, ses she, 'Ef I 'm a-goin' ter pass away, I s'pose I better forgive Ann Warner; but ef I git well,' ses she, 'I do' know.' An' then,

jes' before the last, she riz up an' w'ispers, 'P'r'aps I'd better take it back.' Thirzy's ear was to her mouth. 'Take what back, mother?' ses she. But Mis' Means never spoke ag'in. I expec' Thirzy 'll allers think of her mother as one of the saints let down. An' them that knows better can let it alone. Thirzy 's a-takin' of it hard. She would n't let Jo in w'en he come offerin' help. But he 's a-comin' ter the funeral. She won't see him, though. She 'll be all wrapped in her sorrow an' my old veil. But he 'll stan' straight as an arrer at the foot of the grave. He 'll do his hull duty jes' 's ef he was her marri'd husban'. You see. It 'll be a year o' Sundays, though, before he 's that, 'ith Thirzy feelin' her mother's words about him was a special reverlation."

It was quite as Miss Mahala said. Thirzy lived alone in her little nest. If she saw the sunlight flickering over Jo coming down the cart path, her doors and windows were closed and locked. Although at night he hoed her tiny garden, she took no notice of it. Although by and by he dug her potatoes and left them in the cellar, and gathered her squashes and heaped them in the shed, and picked her apples and put them in the next bin to the potatoes, she still took no notice of it. The winter snows came on, and her paths were made, and the logs in the wood-house split, and the water left to freeze on her doorstone; her face never shone on him with a word of thanks or of forbidding. When April and May came again,

the little garden was made, as a worshiper might offer at the shrine of an unseen deity. Sometimes in the long summer days he surprised her in her sunbonnet, hastening through the woods on some errand; but she flitted past and away like a moth. And sometimes in the nights he came and stood where he could half divine her sitting in the dark at her open window, as if she were a part of the starbeams and the soft night fragrances. He knew just how she looked — frail and fair, like the spirit of a flower, although he never put it into words. And he knew that as she sat there in the dark all her love was going out to him as his went up to her, — only the hand of her mother like a terrible mortmain was thrust between them.

It was clear autumn weather when Thirzy left off going to meeting. She could not sit there blushing and paling and growing faint under Jo's eyes.

"Dear me," said the Elder, "I must put an end to this some way." And he went to see Thirzy.

"Well, Thirzy," he said, as he sat picking at the grapes she had brought him, "what is this I hear? That Jo Warner considers himself engaged to marry you, but that you — "

"Oh, folks are allers talkin'," said Thirzy.

"Don't you think it 's a little hard on Jo?"

"Oh!" cried Thirzy, in a transport, "Mis' Warner would n't let Jo, noway!"

"That 's quite beside the question. You know,

Thirzy," said the Elder, tenderly, "I 've known you two since you were little children. I 've watched you and loved you and prayed for you. I 've seen you grow up, pretty as a white rose. I 've seen Jo finish off his father's house in the hope of having you in it, seen him work his farm and your garden, too, — a first-rate fellow — "

"Oh, I know he is! " cried Thirzy, bursting into tears.

"Then what I want to know is why you treat Jo so? " And the Elder gazed at her as if he had a right to ask.

"I promised mother — " faltered Thirzy.

"You promised your mother — ? "

"To send Jo off. And I did."

"Why was that? Why did your mother object to Jo? "

"She did n't. Pertikerlily. She — she hated Mis' Warner."

"She hated Mrs. Warner? " said the Elder, pausing, with his grape suspended. "Do you suppose your mother has gone to heaven, Thirzy? "

"Suppose my mother has gone to heaven? " cried Thirzy, her tears sparkling. "Of course she has! Of course she has, the dear sufferin' soul! "

"And do you suppose there can be any hatred in heaven? Your mother can't be in heaven if she is still hating old Mrs. Warner. If your mother is in heaven — as I 'm sure I hope she is — she can't be

hating anybody. She must be feeling kindly even to Mrs. Warner. She must be quite willing you should marry Jo, if that is for your best happiness and his."

This was a new view of the case. Thirzy looked up and far away, as if she were trying to penetrate the confines of the unknown. It almost seemed as if by obeying her mother she were keeping her out of heaven. "But a promise is a promise," she murmured.

"Your mother can't be in heaven and wish you to keep it," said the Elder. "You made it while she was here, supposing she was to remain here. Circumstances alter cases." And he thought that if this were sophistry, he must risk its being of a pardonable kind. "As it is," he said, "you are wearing Jo out. Well, I guess I 'll take this bunch of grapes home to Mrs. Perry," he added, after a little. "They 're some sweeter than ours."

"Oh, take them all!" cried Thirzy.

"No," said the Elder. "They only brought one bunch out of Eschol; and this is all *I* want to carry. Now simply think of this: if your mother is where abiding love is, you and Jo are all right."

"B'en to Thirzy's?" asked Miss Mahala, meeting the Elder on his way home. "I 'm jes' come from Mis' Warner's. Does seem cur'us she hain't be'n knowin' to Jo's carryin's-on. Folks don't go there much; she 's so crabbit; an' would n't darst to tell her if they did; an' she 's hed the rheumaticks

an' ain't be'n out. I 've hed 'em myself some. But you sorter expec' things, my age. Yes, she 's jes' ketched on. She 'll make it warm fer Jo. And ef ever there was a boy worked fer his mother double-jointed, 's you may say, an' waited on her es ef he was a gel, it 's him."

"She 's fond of Jo, is n't she?" asked the Elder, looking for a big red leaf to hold his grapes.

"Fond of him? He 's the apple of her eye!"

"I should think she 'd want him to be happy, then."

"She wants him to be happy her way. An' she 's sot as Mount Pisghy. Leaves hev turned reel pretty this fall. Mis' Perry well?"

It was a peaceful autumn afternoon, the pale sky lost in soft hazes near the horizon, a hesitating wind sighing now and then and bringing the spicy smell of the ripe apples. But there was no peace in Mrs. Warner's house or in her heart. "To think how I 've slaved fer that boy, a-fetchin' of him up, an' this is the eend on 't!" she was muttering, as she took the loaves from the big oven. "Mos' murders me to handle 'em. Myra Means 's gel! Oh, good Lord above! I can't stand that!" And tears poured over the brown hands.

"Why, what 's this?" exclaimed Jo, coming in.

"Nothin', oh, nothin' excep' thet I 'm all beat out. That Means gel!" she cried then, her tears vanishing like dew. "That Means gel!"

"What of her?" asked Jo haltingly.

"I suspicioned it oncet. An' then I guessed 't warn't so, an' let it be. An' now you 're a-goin' 'ith her reg'lar. You can't say you ain't!"

"What if I be?" said Jo.

"With that gel of Myra Means's? Why, it drives me wild to think on 't. Myra done me the deadly wrong of my life. I don't forgive her ef 't was afore the jedgment seat! Ain't there any other gels roundabout that you must hev —"

"You need n't to worry, mother," said Jo quietly. "Thirzy won't have me."

"Won't hev ye?" she screamed, her gray hair falling round her brown face in witch-locks with her agitation. "Thirzy Means won't hev ye? Won't hev my Jo?" And she was silent a moment because words failed her. "Ef that ain't high time o' day!" she said presently, in a subdued tone. And then, after another moment's silence: "I 'm glad on 't. It puts an eend to that worsted."

"Mother," said Jo, looking over his mother's head and out the window into the far forest, "I love her with my whole heart an' soul."

"An' where do I come in?" she exclaimed.

"You don't come in at all. You 're there — where you allers was. There 's two sides to a man's feelin's; one ter love his mother with, an' one ter love his wife. But she won't be my wife," he said, with a stifled intonation of love and grief.

"I hope not," said Mrs. Warner. "I dare say she 's pretty. I know she is. But she 's proberly slack. An' ef she 's like her mother —"

"She is n't. She 's her father all over, folks ses."

"Oh, my, oh, my, oh, my!" cried Mrs. Warner, sinking into her low chair that Jo had made from a barrel, rocking herself to and fro, and wringing her hands, partly with the woe of old memory, partly with present trouble. "An' to think I should live till this! My boy I 've worked fer, an' lived fer, an' ter look at him was meat an' drink — an' now to give him up, an' to her! You 've broke my heart, you 've broke my heart!"

He had never seen his mother like this. It seemed a convulsion of nature. He laid his hand heavily on her shoulder. "You need n't take on so, mother," he said. "I won't go near Thirzy ag'in ef it 's goin' ter try you so."

The familiar kitchen, with its rows of pewter, its strings of onions over the shelf, the iron candlesticks and tray and snuffers there, its great dinner horn and the big brass warming-pan, his mother's chair beside the blazing hearth where the crane swung with its kettle — all seemed black with trouble, seemed prisonlike and unendurable. He went out and sat down in the porch he had built with so much love and hope in his heart, and to climb over which he had brought the wild sweetbrier out of the woods. The leaves had fallen; but a pungent smell seemed

to linger round it yet, and remind him of the night with Thirzy on the edge of the wood, now so long, so long ago. It was all over, then. He had not abandoned hope before. This was the end of his work, of his love, of the joy of his life.

"He 's took it quiet," thought his mother, looking sidelong through the window. "But then, that 's his way. I do know. Folks gits over things — 'specially puppy-love. I 'll whip him up a good supper. Oh!" she cried then suddenly, striking her face with her open hands, "I don't believe but what I 'm a wicked woman!"

It was some weeks after this that Mrs. Perry and the Elder sat singing their psalms together by the firelight, the children being in bed, and their stockings hanging from the shelf.

"I don't like the way Jo Warner looks," said Mrs. Perry, breaking off in "Hark! what mean those heavenly voices?" and putting the coals together. He 's what Miss Mahaly calls peekid. I 'm afraid he 's sickening for something. He was n't at meeting yesterday."

"Nor last Sabbath, either," replied the Elder. "I 'm pretty busy; but I 'll step over there to-morrow if the snow ain't too deep. And if it is." And he rose to draw aside the red moreen curtain and look out at the snow whirling past the window's lane of light. "There 's something very sweet to me in the seclusion of a great storm. It shuts me in with

my happiness — my wife, my children," he said. "But I like to set a light in the window for wayfarers, too. Yes, I'll step over to-morrow."

And stepping over, the great hemlocks lifting their boughs and shaking down showers of silvery spray about him, here and there a white birch bowed with its weight of snow and lying on the way prostrate as a sheeted penitent, a flight of birds rising from the cedar swamp, and from the seed vessels thrust through the snow, a fox with his long brush skimming by, he felt the winter world so full of life and joy that he could hardly believe there was such a thing as trouble, till he found Jo burning up with fever, and his mother hovering over him like an animated flame.

"Oh, it 's bad!" she whispered hoarsely, as the Elder stamped the snow off his boots. "Don't make a noise! I dassent hardly breathe. I ain't slep' for seven nights. Feel as if I hed n't no top ter my hed. He 's awfle low. He 's out'n his head. He don't say nothin' but 'Thirzy, Thirzy,' from daylight to dark. Ain't mentioned my name oncet — me, that bore him! The doctor ses — oh, he 's got a reel good constertution — don't you b'lieve mebbe he 'll pull thru, Elder Perry?" she implored, catching at the Elder's sleeve and peering into his face with her tired eyes. "Hev I gotter lose him, too, — my son, my grown son? I can't a-bear it, I can't a-bear it! He must live!" — pouring out her torrent of words under her

breath, the fire in her seeming to burn up her tears as soon as they started. "Oh! I give up!" she exclaimed. "He was all mine oncet. But I give up. Kneel down, Elder, kneel down, I say, an' pray!" she whispered, fiercely. "Pray for all you're worth that my boy shell live. Say my heart's melted. Say it's broke. I 've be'n wicked. I 'd orter hev my punishment — but I can't take it, I can't! Ter hev him took! Oh, yes, I give up. Somebody go fer Thirzy. I 'll take her right in. I'll do my best. Oh my little boy, my boy!" She wept, careless who saw the contortion of her face.

There came, as she was speaking, a rap at the door, timid at first, then bold. The door was thrown open, letting in a burst of red sunset, and Thirzy ran and threw her arms round Mrs. Warner's neck.

"Oh, I ain't never spoke to you in my life, Mis' Warner," she cried. "But you fergive me fer bein' me, won't you? Both on us love him so! I'll be a reel good child ter you —"

"You 'll be an angel of the Lord ef your comin' cures my boy! You 'll be my own little darter, as you 'd orter be'n!" said Mrs. Warner, forgetting to whisper. "Oh, my heart, I seen him thru the door; I seen him smile! There ain't no mistake. I du b'lieve he 's a-comin' ter his senses. The doctor said he might — he jes' might — by sundown, ef I kep' the ice to his head, an' I kep' it, tel he dozed inter this sleep that 's deep as if he was in a fur country. Stand off

an' let me look at ye, ye child of John Means! You 're proper pretty — "

"Come, come, Mrs. Warner, you 're making Thirzy blush."

"Wal, I 'm plumb pleased! My poor Jo! You marry 'em now, Elder, whilst you 're here, an' we 'll ketch holt an' nuss him tergether, Thirzy an' me — "

"Oh, I don't know about that, Mrs. Warner — "

"Elder! Ever sense you come, an' we begun ter keep Christmus, I gin Jo a bunch o' raisins an' a orange, an' he gin me the 'Farmer's Almanack.' But this new darter o' mine 'll be a present all the year roun' fer both on us. I feel to be grateful!" She began to bustle about like a little brown whirlwind. "I 'll jes' give him his drops," she said. She came back beaming in a few moments. "He 's better a'ready," she whispered, loudly. "Fever 's cooled. He knowed me. He looked up and smiled an' said 'Mother.' Come Thirzy — come, Elder!"

"But, Mrs. Warner, my dear woman, is n't this — is n't it rather sudden?"

"Lord o' love! A change o' heart ushully comes sudding, don't it, Elder?"

A RURAL TELEPHONE

III

A Rural Telephone

THE great clock ticked with loud insistence in the immaculate room. Things had to be immaculate where Mrs. Dacre was. The sunlight sifting through bare branches gilded the brown shadows of the walls ceiled in old pine, and now the color of the dead leaves whirling without. The bed was of snowy whiteness, and the old woman propped on her pillows was whiter yet.

"There, mother dear," said Nancy. "It 's all apple-pie. An' I 'll go to work. There 's consider'ble i'nin' to do out there. But if any one comes in, you 're as neat as a pin an' as pretty as a pink."

"My! There 's no need of any one's comin' in, sence we got the 'phone. Jes' give it here, Nancy, an' I 'm content."

The telephone was at the head of the bed. It was a recent acquisition in the little community, and regarded as a delightful toy with which one could not play too much.

The daughter took down the receiver and laid it on the pillow by her mother's ear. "I s'pose it 's all right," she said, hesitatingly, as she had said before.

"Of course it is!" was the swift reply. "If any one finds fault with a bedridden old woman fer tryin'

to keep along with the world, they can! Why, the satusfaction I 've had out o' this sence we put it in passes all I could git out o' sewin'-circle an' perrish meetin' put together!"

"I don't believe any one cares if you do use it," Nancy said, comforting her conscience.

"Only old Mis' Monroe. An' she ses to Mis' Plumer — I heern her myself — 'I can't talk any more now,' ses she. 'Old Mis' Dacre 's listenin',' ses she. 'I ain't, either!' ses I, real sharp."

"Why, mother!"

"Well, I wa'n't. I had the handle down, because I can't stan' the ringin' clost to my ear, it 's so sudding. An', too, I wanted to hear if Ann Mari' Speer 'd sold her chickings fer enough to buy her plum-color dress. It 'll set off her skin lovely. Why should n't I? Ann Mari' 'd tell me herself. Fact is, Nancy, it 's like a continnered story in the papers. I 'm reely curus to know if Almedy Bent 's goin' to cut her skirt bell-shape or gored. Gored 'd fit her figger best. This piller ain't jes' right, Nancy. There — that 's it. Deacon Morse was callin' up Mis' Morse — he was to West Centre. Did n't git her, fust call. Seems he could n't raise but a dollar an' a half for his apples, an' won't sell. So I guess we 'd better keep our'n for one seventy-five. If some spile, they 'll more 'n everage up."

"The ground was covered with a hoar frost this mornin' — it looked beautiful on the brown grass."

"Means a thaw. Have the suller winders opened then. When Danny comes round would n't you better send a basketful to Mis' Ruggles? Them won't spile. I never could see why everybody don't hev an apple tree as much as a back door. They 're motherly creeturs with their broodin' boughs. It makes me feel dretful bad to think of Johnny runnin' off to sea an' forsakin' Ann Mari'. It 's mos' broke Mis' Ruggles down. Don't you fergit about sendin' the apples, Nancy. I declare to man, I do' know w'at we done afore we hed the rural telephone. It 's better 'n rural free delivery; for that comes now an' then, but this comes all the time. I useter lie here like a dead tree — nothin' stirrin' but the pend'lum of the clock tickin' off my days like a sentence o' death. An' now I 'm all alive an' full o' the life of folks. I don't need to see 'em the way I did when the days was so long. An' w'en they do come in I 've got lots to tell 'em. Now the days ain't long enough."

There was a whir, sudden as the challenge of a rattlesnake, and the receiver was at Mrs. Dacre's ear. "Tut, tut!" she said. "It 's only Mis' Monroe a-tellin' Mamy to wear her rubbers. Them sort o' no-account messages make me disappointed as I be when I 'm readin' the paper if there ain't anybody I know in the deaths an' marriages. There! you won't never git to your work. I 'm reel comf'able. Comf'able as I can be, I calkerlate. It does seem one

o' the mysteries, when I useter be head of everythin' here, that I can't set foot to the floor — "

"P'r'aps you could, mother dear, if you tried."

"Nancy! You go right about your work! If that 's all the symperthy I git — "

And Nancy laughed and kissed her mother and was gone.

"Oh, you pretty flower!" said Mrs. Dacre — when the door was closed.

But what she had said was quite true; Mrs. Dacre had a native desire to rule which made it impossible for her not to meddle. She was never too tired to wake in the night and walk a couple of miles to a sick-bed. Few were born in the place without her help; few died that she did not close their eyes. She had sprung from slippery stone to slippery stone, crossing the brook, the ice breaking up; she had gone through the hills in driving snow where many a shepherd lost the way; and the summer lightnings never held her back on her errands of mercy. She could hardly have told you if they were errands of mercy or of desire to be a part of all that was going on. She was the confidante of the village; they reported to her, consulted her, came to her in trouble; her curiosity conquered, her vivacity cheered; her love of ruling gave support.

Of course all this had been a strain on strength and nerve, although she had plenty of both. "I 'm mos' beat out," she used to say. "Troubles always

come when you least expect them most." But she would not abate her activities; they had become a habit with cravings like those of an opium-eater.

And then came Nancy's love-affair, and her wild objection to it, and Nancy's quiet persistence; and in a passion of angry excitement she had taken to her bed and had remained there ever since. The telephone then had become a mild substitute for her drug.

That Saul Manners, one of the Black Mannerses, should dare lift his eyes to her Nancy — her white, delicate Nancy! He, a Manners of the Hollow, a race always shiftless, always thriftless, sometimes beggars, maybe worse! To be sure, a wife from far away had once come there, a proud, defiant creature — Saul had her burning black eyes — but she had faded out of light and life and left her boy among them. Mrs. Dacre never forgot the illumination that kindled in those eyes of hers at the moment she understood there was only an hour or two more to live and the opening gates showed her the way to freedom. And Nancy! It was making the nest of a silver dove out of the common mud. The Dacres were poor, perhaps, land-poor still; but they were the old settlers, the first proprietors, the aristocrats of the region. They had always held their heads high. And now to have him —

"Why, when he was a boy he useter come fer our skim-milk!" she cried.

"He don't now," said Nancy. "And all them are dead and gone. And he 's sold the Hollow, an' got a place on the hill, an' paid for it, an' don't scant on anythin'."

"Reg'lar driver. But he ain't a-goin' to drive my Nancy to her death."

"Mother! He loves me!"

"Calf-love," said the old woman, wrathfully adjusting the pillows herself. "He 'll love a good many gels yet."

"Never, never, mother! An' you 'll break his heart, an' mine too."

"I ain't no symperthy for these early loves an' heart-breaks. As if there wa'n't nothin' else in the world but keepin' company! Your heart ain't so brittle. He loves himself. That 's who! And it 'd be a great lift to him to git into our fam'bly. He 'ith his brother Steve a-trompin' the road! My brick 's gitting cold, Nancy. My feet are like the clods of the valley. Marry! How can you marry anybody, 'ith me on your han's!"

"He 'd help. He 'd be a reel son to you," sobbed Nancy, as she bent to find the brick.

"I 've got a daughter. I don't want no sons of the Manners sort — always nine o'clock with them till it 's ten! And I ain't one o' them that whiffles about, Nancy. I ain't willin' to have him come in here an' master me, an' I ain't goin' to be took care of in any house o' his'n. An' there it is!" And the

paler and thinner and sadder Nancy looked, as she went about her tasks, the fiercer the old woman grew with the sense of her responsibility for it. But that her child should condescend from the high estate of a Dacre to that of the Black Manners, the low-browed, beggarly crew — it was not to be thought of!

"It 's no use, Saul," said Nancy, when her lover came to the foot of the garden, one night of the last spring. "I can't leave mother."

"I don't ask you to leave her! Dear, my dear, I 'd make her more comfortable than she ever dreamed."

Nancy was crying softly, hiding her face in his arm.

"There, there!" he said, as one might soothe a child, and laying his face on her soft hair. "We 're better off than some, for we 've got each other. If we never marry, I 'll be faithful to you, Nancy, till the day I die an' after."

"Oh, oh, I don't want to keep you bound, an' cut off from a home an' — an' all!"

"I am bound! There 's nothin' in the world can undo that. I 'm yours, single or married, an' into the other life. An' if there 's no marryin' nor givin' in marriage there, there 's no divorcin', neither!"

The freshness of upturned furrows came on the breath of the south wind blowing up rain, and the fragrance of the apple blossoms streamed round them in long wafts as they stood there hidden by the

mists of the kindly night; and full of the invincible spirit of youth that feels its immortality, the earth was beautiful and life was sweet even in their trouble. To-morrow — well, to-morrow the roses might be in bloom. And Nancy stayed half happy in the thought of her lover, and trusting to time for her mother, a shade of sadness clouding the happiness and giving her a pathetic sweetness that moved the heart of every one but her mother — her mother who adored her, but would not have let her know it for anything under heaven.

But indeed all the village regarded the girl tenderly. Lally James wanted her father, when he bought her a new print, to buy another for Nancy. Mrs. Somers told her mother that if anything happened to her she would take Nancy for her own.

"There 's nothin' goin' to happen," said Mrs. Dacre, with sublime confidence.

The child took every one's affection for granted; a rosy, darling thing, her head sunning over with curls, her smile always kindling, her pretty pouting kisses always ready. Every little while she went the tour of the village. "I 'm glad I come to dinner here," she said, where pork and greens made the feast. "I sorrow for you," she said, where some illness was. "Ev'ybody wuvs me ve'y much, and I wuv ev'ybody," she declared elsewhere. And everybody did; from the time she took off her own shoes to give them to a child who had none, till long after

she had turned up her lovely locks, everybody felt an ownership in her and her affections.

"I can't think why people are so good to me," Nancy once said.

"Why should n't they be?" said her mother. "Ain't you John Dacre's daughter?"

John Dacre's daughter! Although Nancy felt her mother a part of the walls of the world, it was her father, in his always subdued and quiet mood, toward whom her heart yearned.

But this willful old woman had not always been a Dacre herself, although she had so completely identified herself with her husband's family that she had half forgotten the fact. There was a time when she was a much humbler person, a handsome, spirited girl who earned her bread with carding and spinning from house to house. Strange to say, every one else seemed to have forgotten that, too, with such force and assurance had she taken hold of life when she became John Dacre's wife. And John Dacre had not been the only man who cared for her. There had been a dark and reckless young scamp who had made her feel his power. She had seen him shoot the bird on the wing, she had seen him breaking his great white horse, she had seen him diving in the lake for a drowning man — alas! his name was Manners. He overtook her when her work was done, and went along with her; he met her by the brook, and skipped pebbles there; he leaned

over the bridge with her, and each was to the other a part of the magical beauty when twilight veils the day and the stars tremble out. He followed her up on the high pastures knee-deep in the spicy sweet-fern and bayberry, and into the green shadows of the wood. Once, through a gap of crowding trees she saw the red flame of the sunset repeated and flashing in Aleck Manners's eyes; and once, that once, his arms were about her, and his lips were on hers, and in that moment she comprehended all the sweetness, all the honeyed richness, of life — and in the next she broke away and ran; she had half plighted faith with John Dacre, and John Dacre was a comfortable man. She always hated the sight of that wood; she closed the window of her room that commanded it and the sunset glow shining through it, and set the head of her bed against it. For years she could see that flame burning in Aleck Manners's eyes whenever she shut her own. But in time she outgrew it. It made her shudder then to think she might have been one of those miserable Mannerses. But love seemed to be burned out of her in that one fiery moment. She was a good wife; she took faithful care of John Dacre, with an aggressive loyalty, standing somewhat in awe of the silent man; but not till her little Nancy came did she ever forget herself in another. The child appeared to her like a wonderful white flower blossoming out of the deadness of her inner life. Her child and John Dacre's —

she was a miracle! Her innocence, her exquisite infantile delicacy, were a perpetual marvel; the universe had come to its perfection in Nancy. When she saw the wind stirring the fine fair hair, and the blue eyes mirroring heaven, she felt this was the top of beauty. In her long cloak, the child in her arms, she went into the green woods as if to teach her the spell of weaving branches; she dipped her in the brook, and the sparkle of the waters on the little rosy limbs seemed the radiance of some young angelic creature; you would have met her down any lane when the wild roses were in bloom, as if the loveliness of the earth were her darling's only fit companion. Then, living in the child, worshiping her, she began to love the children of others; and loving the children, their fathers and mothers grew dear, and so presently she ruled and mastered the small community through serving them. When she went out at night to watch by some sick-bed, the child was under her cloak, cradled by and by on a pillow, there as if she were part of the healing forces. And in the bright dawning it seemed to the mother as if cure lay in the sight of that sweet countenance. Wars crashed over the land; it did not signify. The great elements were harnessed; it did not signify. John Dacre died; it—did not signify. So long as there was Nancy the world rolled on serenely; there was need of nothing else.

Sometimes in those old wild wood ways she had

met Miss Mahala, then a strange, dark young person who looked as if smothered fires were burning her to the ash of eld. As she bent over the child the mother felt she wrought some spell, and was half afraid till a smile illumined that dark face like a burst of sunshine on a gloomy landscape. Perhaps the remembrance hindered her from feeling any rivalry in the later years. But by the time Miss Mahala entered on her kingdom Mrs. Dacre's energies were declining, while she recognized that Miss Mahala administered affairs in their larger aspect.

And then as always Nancy's going out of the house sent shadow into every room; sunshine came with her returning. The hours when she herself was away from Nancy seemed time lost out of life; she looked forward to being at home with her again as to some festival. All the passion, all the fire, of her powerful nature wrapped the child. She thought — until she was tried — that she would have given Nancy her heart's blood. She had a certain fierce protecting instinct of the wild creature for its whelp; she felt that she could never die while Nancy needed her. She wondered what the child's dreams were about; she was jealous of the young woman's thoughts — tranquil thoughts they were, for Nancy was a Dacre. When Nancy joined the church, it seemed unnecessary; Nancy had been born perfect. When summer days were long and fine, they seemed the promise of long, fine life to Nancy; and when

great winter storms were raging, the mother lay in a transport of content, shut in with her sleeping Nancy.

The bitterness of it, then, when from this depth of satisfaction she woke to the fact that Nancy loved some one other than herself — and that other a Manners! In a day, an hour, she grew old. Her sins had found her out, the sin of the world had come to her door and was visited on her head. The blush branded her face so that its stain remained. The son of Aleck Manners! She remembered that man's love, his kiss, as a crime she had committed. That his son should love Nancy was profanation, was sacrilege! Had Nancy been overtaken by any dangerous illness, although it tore her heart, she would have given her bitter medicine. She must have bitter medicine now.

So, Saul being forbidden the borders, Mrs. Dacre contrived work enough for Nancy to keep her hands and her thoughts full through her waking hours. But she could not hinder Nancy's dreams at night, and perhaps it was their sweetness that gave her every morning the soft flush on her cheek, the brightness of the beaming eye, the tender smile about the lips, until they faded into the light of common day, and the patient look of endurance that came in their place.

"You ain't eatin' enough, Nancy," her mother said.

"I ain't much appetite."

"That 's no matter," said the indomitable old spirit. "You eat! You 'll git the good of it whether you want it or not. You had the combs fetched in? Honey 's fust-rate for you. Who took 'em? You?"

"Saul took them, mother."

"Did you pay him?"

"Pay Saul!"

"That honey 'd orter make you sick! Oh, me, me, there ain't a trouble sharper 'n an ongrateful child gives ye!" But just then the telephone bell tinkled, and Mrs. Dacre surmounted her own trouble temporarily in her lively interest in the affairs of others. For a mill having been built on the rapids behind the Davison Hill a telephone wire had been required. Mrs. Dacre was one of the first to take advantage of it; but Miss Mahala had stoutly refused to have anything to do with it. If it was n't the work of evil spirits, she reasoned, it would do their work in bringing the outside world into the Settlement. The Davisons always did mischief, she said.

It was late that afternoon that Mrs. Ruggles passed the window and came in. She had a branch of witch-hazel, strung with its threads of bloom, in her hand. "I thought I 'd fetch it over," she said, "jest 's token that summer ain't all gone. I mind you like the nat'ral thin's. Somehow I feel when this blows that it 's a sign the Lord 's lookin' out for us still, as much as when the bow was set in heaven. Ain't that

so, Mis' Dacre? I take it as a promise o' spring flowers."

"It 's most excellent for a bruise," said Mrs. Dacre. "I was jes' tellin' Mis' Bent to git the flowers an' make a poultice for Tom 's hurt —"

"W'y, I did n't know — How 'd you hear?"

"They 'phoned for Dr. Bly. But he 'd gone down to Salt Water. So I told her what to do. She was obleeged an' thankful."

Mrs. Ruggles was a colorless little woman, who would have looked hardly more than the shadow of some one else if a black eye had not animated the ashes like a coal of fire and given her life and personality. She fidgeted now, took another chair, raised the window-shade, and tied its cord and tassel again. "You 'phoned?" she said. "Mis' Dacre, I 'm half a mind to tell you sunthin'."

"Make it a whole one, Phœbe. I knowed you hed sunthin' on your mind. 'T ain't nat'ral for you to talk about posies."

"I do' know. Wal, anyways — Mis' Dacre, the folks is all mad as hornets at your tappin' the 'phone so."

"They be!"

"Yes. They found out 't was you — fust, because thin's that sot 'em all by the ears come from you direct. An' nex', because they could hear a big clock tickin' away like an ingine, an' you 're the only one that 's got a gran'ther's clock —"

"*They* was tappin' then."

"An' they 're a-talkin' of goin' down to headquarters an' hev it put a stop to — "

Mrs. Dacre sat up straight — she had not done such a thing in months. "Me!" she said. "Put a stop to!" Her great eyes were like a wild creature's. "Mis' Ruggles," she said, "do you mean to say that any of my neighbors grudge me — shet in from meetin' an' from prayer-meetin' as I be — gittin' what plaisure I can out o' this telephone?" She stopped a moment, as if in review. "Why," she said then, "they 've allus come to me with everythin' all their lives, or sent for me to come to them, an' told me all their worriments. An' why should n't I hev it this way, now when I can't go out? I vow to man — "

"I 'm only speakin' to save you trouble, Mis' Dacre," said Mrs. Ruggles, laying the witch-hazel aside, as one making ready for a fray. "I come over a-pupuss, at consider'ble pains. I hev a lot to do, now Johnny 's gone, an' I mos' broke my back choppin' kindlin's, tel Saul Manners see me, an' come, in the goodness o' his heart, an' sawed an' split all my winter's wood, free gift. I thought you 'd orter know."

"You 're all right, Mis' Ruggles. But it 's cruelty! That 's what it is! It 's small business to crowd an old woman this way. An' then, too," she said, in a calmer tone, "it 's mighty hard besides — for

Mis' Symon 's be'n tellin' Mis' Somers a story she 's be'n readin' in some story paper, as I gather, an' it 's jest at the most interestin' p'int — "

"Du tell! What 's it all about? "

"Lemme see. Why, it 's about a gel, a young gel — she wa'n't a beauty, you know, but there was sunthin' to her — maybe like you an' me, when we was young, don't you see — "

"No, I don't! " said the other, with emphasis. "Cap'n Ruggles allus said I *was* a beauty."

"So. Every eye makes its own, ye know. An' there 's some thinks faculty 's better 'n any show o' good looks. John Dacre did. Anyways, this young gel — they ain't called her by name — had faculty, an' had that, whatever it is, that makes folks set by her. Folks was fond on her — the minister, the deacon, the doctor — there was nobody that wa'n't. And of course there was some one wanted to marry her, an' she him. A fine feller, han'some, sober, forehanded, 'most a church member. An' the course o' true love, you know, never did run smooth; an' there was an old woman in the fam'bly jes' put her foot down an' forbid the banns. There wa'n't no reason why; but she did. An' she kerried her p'int. An' they said 'twas jes' like them thin's in outlandish stories — an old vampire gittin' the gel's life-blood. An' then somebody cut the 'phone off, an' the last thin' they said was that the gel was goin' in a gallopin' consumption. An' there ain't a cure known for gallopin'

consumption! My Lord, Mis' Ruggles, what if it 'd be'n my Nancy!" And suddenly Mrs. Dacre stopped, her eyes, that had been welling with tears, shedding them like pearls as they opened wider and wider. She clapped her hand over her mouth.

"What is it, Mis' Dacre! My grief, what is it!"

For a moment Mrs. Dacre did not speak. She was staring into vacancy as if she saw something horrible there. And then she fell back on her pillow, gasping. "My Nancy!" she was whispering to herself. "My Nancy!"

"Where 's the camphire?" cried Mrs. Ruggles. But the old woman pushed her aside when she brought it.

"You 'll find a pair o' shoes in that cluset," she whispered presently. "An' some stockin's in the left-han' corner o' the lower drawer o' the chist. Fetch 'em here — quick as winkin' — any on 'em! An' now, if you 'll give me a helpin' han', I 'll see what I can do, the Lord helpin', too." And presently Mrs. Dacre was sitting on the side of the bed, with a foot on the ground. "Do you s'pose I can walk acrost the floor?" she asked.

"I s'pose you can do most anythin' you set out to do," answered obedient Phœbe.

"I guess some folks 'll be supprised," said Mrs. Dacre, drawing in her breath and gingerly following one foot with the other. "There!" she exclaimed, triumphantly, as, grasping the bedpost, she stood up.

"When I was a baby an' could pull myself up by a cheer, I walked off. I would n't wonder if I could do it again!" And slightly tottering, but imperiously waving Mrs. Ruggles away, she crossed the room to the big chest of drawers, and found the various garments she wanted. "You jest toss thet bed together, Phœbe, if you wanter help," she said. "There!" she exclaimed again at last. "I guess I kin du without the 'phone. You tell the folks, Phœbe. A man in the house makes a consider'ble diff'runce. Now," she said, retracing her steps, "I 'm clothed, an' in my right mind. But I do feel wobbly. Where 's the 'phone? Central! Gimme 9 — 0 — 9, ring three. I want the Elder."

"Mother! Mother!" cried Nancy, running in, breathlessly, her flat-iron holder in hand. "Oh, what has happened! Get right back into bed! Oh, mother dear, do! Oh, you ain't a-goin' to die!" And she threw her arms around the recent invalid in a resisting terror.

"Die? Nonsense, Nancy! Die! I 'm as well as ever I was in my life. I 've had a beautiful rest. Where 's your cambric dress?"

"My — what — which one?" asked Nancy, not knowing what she said, and trembling as if before some catastrophe.

"Which one? The only one you got! The one I stood up in with your father an' made over fer you! Put it on quick — here 's Mis' Ruggles 'll hook

it up. There ain't a-goin' to be any gallopin' consumption in this house! I 'm callin' the Elder to fetch Saul Manners here, out o' hand. What fer? Don't you see I 've got my silk gownd on? I 'm a-goin' to a weddin'! My heart, what a blessin' the telephone is!"

THE STEP-FATHER

IV

The Step-Father

IT was peace at last. Nathan was off in the dew of the morning. Emmy had gone about on her crutch, clearing up, and had picked over the berries which, with bread and milk, were to be the children's dinner. She would give them thick Jersey cream to-day; not because Nathan was away, but, well, — because! And Davy was looking peaked after that terrible dip in the surf. Nathan might be gone 'most a week. She would have time to build Davy up. He needed mothering. And she did n't mother him much before Nathan. Sometimes, when the chance came, she crept up to Davy's bedside and let him put his arms around her neck and draw her head down on the pillow; and they loved each other a great deal in the few moments. Nathan was good; but you could n't expect him to care for another man's child as he did for his own — and that other man his mortal enemy.

Davy was outdoors now, playing with the Child, as they called him — dear little Than — Ranger's great bay assisting. And she had bowed the blinds and arranged herself for a rest on the settee, and the vine with its pink flower was tapping on the window, and the breath of the honeysuckles and wild roses,

full and sweet in the clear morning air, was coming into the dim room, and she had been up since three, and she was falling away in a dream when her mother burst in crying, "Where 's Nathan?"

"Gone down to ma'sh," said Emmy. "Why?"

"The Child 's in the well! That 's why! I allers knowed that well. There was nobody dropped a white stun in it when 't was digged. An' I dassent go down! An' you can't 'ith yer lame foot. Oh, he 'll be drowned w'ile ye 're talkin'!"

"Send Davy!" gasped Emmy, getting breath after the shock, seizing her crutch and throwing herself out while Mrs. Ester spoke. "Send Davy down!"

Nathan was a rich farmer, who had a goodly piece of marsh a dozen or more miles away from the coast, before one reached Salt Water. His men and his neighbors went with him to the mowing and the stacking of the hay that could not be brought home in the big gundelow, but would be hauled over the ice by and by.

Going to marsh was the event of the summer in the Settlement, and Nathan looked forward to it as a boy to a holiday. The loaves of bread, the doughnuts, the pies, the pandowdy, the ham, the baked beans, the jugs of coffee, the August Flower apples, would have fed a troop. "The men-folks all count on goin' down the medder 'ith you," said Emmy, as she pressed down the cork of the last jug of molasses and ginger water, to be wrapped in wet towels for

the thirst which was not to know the cool freshness of old cider till later in the day.

The other men might like the meadow-mowing for the frolic; but Nathan loved it for the slow sail in the breaking day, the camping under the stars of the immense, open sky, the gentle coming of the sunrise, with the heavens of every color, the message of the morning star in the dusk of dawn, and at last the homeward sail in sunset and evening shadows — with Emmy waiting. They went now pushing the gundelow with poles through the sedges of the narrow creek, till they should come out on the little river and spread the clumsy sail; and, if the wind played fair, all was well; and, if not, they would bend to their long sweeps.

The thread of a golden, waning moon had faded, and the pearly gray of sky and air was interfused with a dream of rose. As they came to the more open water, the reaches there seemed to have been waiting for them, reaches of green marshes drenched in dew, shot everywhere with silver; and it struck him anew that this wide world of green wonder had been here all night, all day, living its own life. They crept through tall swishing thatch that swept back, lifting its sparkling blades above their heads. A belated water-rat slipped low through the bordering rushes; a bird tossed off from the tip of a tall spire; and now they were in the open river. A flock of gulls flashed white and silver over them; a meadow-

lark was singing; there came a sound of surf from far away; a scarlet fin flashed down translucent depths, and here a streak of silver. Then all the air was opaline, and the broken gleams, the freshness and dewiness, were as if the pale land and water were just made and divided by the hand of God.

In all the wideness and gathering light, the ineffable luminous distance, the tingling odors of grass and sea, Nathan felt in inarticulate ways an opening mystery that he was never quite to penetrate. The slow movement, the companionship with the gray water, the gray air pierced here and there with sun and flame, the swelling tide, the mists rolling in white billows from the glistening grass, the whole long hour, was like a sacrament to Nathan. He wished the Elder were with him. But, although some of the men were the Elder's deacons, or on the way to become so, they would not have cared to have him there. They were not going to swear; the hard cider was allowed at the mowing; but it was their day of freedom, their bout of wrestling at end of work, their swim at high water, if the tides were considerate. Consequently, the Elder might have been out of place.

And so the long day began; the grass fell in broad swaths before the singing scythes, Nathan, youngest and most stalwart, setting the mighty stroke. They had finished the noon meal and were stretching their shoulders for another advance, when Harding cried, "What 's that mean, Nate?" and a small gunning-

float was rounding a creek, paddled with all the power of Davy's little arms.

The original sin in Nathan suddenly made itself felt; but he said not a word. If Harding had exclaimed, "Blast that boy!" he would have been indignant. It was Emmy's child; and he had come to know that Davy was only the child of his mother. He had tried not to think of the father.

There had been no time in his youth when he had not expected to marry Emmy himself. He had built his house; and Emmy had said just where she wanted the buttery and where she would have the spring-house; and she would have the well deep enough to be inexhaustible, and he had sunk it through the ledge to living water. A man died afterwards, so long afterwards that people doubted if it was from injury at the blasting; but Mrs. Ester did not like to drink that water. And Emmy had her wedding-clothes, and he his freedom suit, and they meant it should be when harvesting was over.

Then there came along a dashing recruiting sergeant, a slim and handsome fellow in his uniform, full of taking arts and most engaging ways, with a flash in the tail of his eye and a smile and a voice that would wile a bird from a bough. And what girl of lonely farms would not have felt some impulsion towards the adventure and daring, the force of the unknown, the kindling of imagination? Although he took no men away with him, he took Emmy.

Emmy came back within two years. Her husband had been killed in a barroom scuffle; but she wore no mourning. She carried a child with a lame back in her arms. The boy had a slow, if not defective, intelligence. Except to walk up and down the yard with him, she never went out of the house.

It was after she heard of the man's death that Emmy's mother had the sickness which called the Elder up the hill, Miss Mahala Brooks having told him about her.

"If you want the plain truth," said Miss Mahala, "she 's ben a-practicin' witchcraft."

"Miss Mahala," said the Elder, "I 'm surprised at you."

"Oh, you no need," she said. "The fact is our fust folks over here was surrounded 'ith forests, an' dear knows w'at o' terrors, an' their thoughts was all about mysteries, an' they was hungry for marvels, an' filled the dark 'ith signs an' wonders, an' was allers circumventin' sperrits. Sort o' in our blood. No, it ain't all petered out yit. I dessay you an' Mis' Perry don't like to spill the salt a-tween ye."

"Nor anywhere else," said the Elder.

"As fer that poor little critter," Miss Mahala continued, "she 's ben a-livin' up there on her perch all alone, an' she sees thin's o' darkness, an' she knows how the wind 's goin' ter blow by the way the cat p'ints her tail, an' she has a black cat because it 's intimate 'ith them thin's. There can't a cloud sweep

over the clover 'ithout her thinkin' it 's the shadder of Apollyon. Natur' helps her, too. I was to supper there, an' she give me two teaspoons. 'There,' ses she, 'some one 's comin' here hungry!' An', sure enough, Emmy come home that night. An' w'en they was firin' that Fourth o' July cannon on the hilltop an' the shock broke her little lookin'-glass, 'there 's goin' ter be a death in this fam'bly,' ses she, a-crossin' her fingers. An', ef you 'll b'lieve it, that recruiter was killed that day!"

"'T ain't nothin' doctor's stuff, nor Bible varses either, can cure," said Emmy's mother, when the Elder came up the hill. She rocked violently a little while. "It 's the mind that 's killin' me!" she exclaimed then. "You 're sure, Elder, you 'll never speak on 't?" she said again after a little. "I won't git no relief till I du tell. An' I do' know how I *can* tell!" And again she was silent. "I don't s'pose the lor can reach me?" she said presently, as if just waking. "But there! Oh, I 'm an awfle wicked woman! You listenin'? Hark! Elder, I ain't sure but w'at I 've done murder!"

"Mrs. Ester!"

"Yes, Elder Perry. I won't keep nothin' back," swallowing hard. "I took my cake o' beeswax, an' I made a man out'n it, mebbe a finger long, ye know. An' I sot it on the h'arth ter melt. An' I said, ses I, 'Power o' darkness, power o' sin, melt him as I melt this thin'. 'Bracalam!' An' he died, Elder, he

died. An' I s'pose I kilt him! Oh, do you s'pose I kilt him?" she asked piteously.

"Is it possible," said the Elder, "that all my ministering has come to this!"

"He took my Emmy," she whimpered. "He tormented her! There's the letter she sent ter tell me."

"You break my heart!"

"You must n't talk that a-way, Elder!" she sobbed. "I won't hear tell 't. I only meant ter git my Emmy back. She 's my own an' only."

"Mrs. Ester," said the Elder, "you committed a crime in your heart; and you are not sorry for it. You are only frightened."

"Oh, w'at do ye guess 'll be done ter me!" she moaned, shivering.

"Nothing."

She looked up, radiant for a heart-beat.

"Your punishment is in yourself," he continued. "In being a creature capable of such sin and folly. A worm is a worm."

"It don't allers stay a worm, Elder," a light in her black eye making her tears seem like sparks of fire.

"That is true," said the Elder, more gently. "Perhaps, sometime you will find your wings, too. There is only one way. Except —" the Elder paused, having some care of the body as well as of the soul. "Well, some raisins in your porridge, and some red meat every day, will help you. I will bring a tonic when I come again."

"Oh, Elder, I would n't 'a' hurt ye fer all the gold in Guinea! You forgive me, an' I guess the Lord will. But here 's Emmy fetched that child o' his'n, — an' I do' know how I can a-bear it!"

"There 's nothing else to do," said the Elder, simply.

"He 's crooked," whispered Mrs. Ester.

"He needs his grandmother so much the more."

"An' he ain't all there. Sits starin' an' makin' faces."

"Come, come, Mrs. Ester. He 'll outgrow that."

"W'en he looks at ye' 'ith them big eyes — wal, *I* do' know!"

And at last the Elder prayed with Mrs. Ester. "He ain't prayed a mite fer me," she said afterwards. "'Most all he said was fer Davy. An' he went off before I could call Emmy ter give him some o' my rosb'ry-shrub. It 's a sight more body to it 'n Mis' Warner's."

Emmy had been back a year before Nathan saw her. Then one day he kindled a fire on the hearth of the house he had built, whose fires had not been lighted before, and went up the hill. Emmy rose as he came into the dark, low room that afternoon. Pale as death, she hung her head and dared not look up, poised on one foot as if for flight. Then, in some way, she became conscious that his arms were open and held out to her; and she fled into them as into a refuge. "Get your bonnet," he said hoarsely.

"We will go down to the Elder's and then to our own house. The fire's waitin'."

"She ain't a scrap to blame, Nathan!" piped her mother. "That fellow got her will under. The' is sech thin's."

"It's all a bad dream," said Nathan.

"No, no," said Emmy. "It's no dream." And she glanced at Davy, who sat on the floor, watching the cat wash her face. "You see it 's no dream."

"He can stay with your mother," said Nathan.

"Stay with mother! My boy? No, no, no," cried Emmy. "I'm all he 's got. You see, you see!"

"Emmy!"

"Leave my child? An' to mother, who 's scared of him? My poor Davy! What sort of a woman 'd I be? I done wrong. Oh, I know I done wrong; but I 'll not do that." And she caught the wondering child in her arms and faced Nathan in her mother's fury, her cheeks flaming, her eyes flashing, her tears glittering.

But Nathan hardly saw her for the blur before his heated brain. "You would give me up a second time?" he said.

"Oh, Nathan!" she sobbed, hiding her face in the child's gown.

But Nathan had gone. He was on his way to release the Elder.

"You forbid your own banns, Nathan?" asked the good man.

"Fer all time," Nathan replied. "I'll go now and scatter the bran's. There'll never be fire in that h'arth ag'in."

"Because she won't abandon her child. What would you think of her if she did?" He paused. "In old times," he said, then, "I used to go hunting considerable. Perhaps I was n't exactly a mighty hunter before the Lord, but I brought down good game. Once, I had unearthed a big bear from a hollow in a blueberry swamp, where she had brought her cubs to feast. She was an old marauder and knew about guns. She could have made kindlings of my gun-stock, but that meant exposing her cubs to fire first; she could have escaped with a few bounds to safety, but that meant leaving her cubs at my mercy. And so she stood there shielding them and defying me. It was in my unregenerate days, but I thought too well of the mother defending her young to hurt her; I left her standing over them."

"You mean that I should suffer all my life by sight of that man's child?"

"Her child — the sorry youngster. But I look for his improvement, man."

"To be put in mind every day by her —"

"Don't say it, my son. I am inclined to think," said the Elder, looking up at the sky and watching a hawk pursue a bird in the blue, "yes, inclined to think Emmy was — well, not a free agent. You may have heard of such a thing as hypnotism. No? But there

is said to be a quality — about which little is known — possessed by some, through which they oblige another person to obey body and soul. That 's possibly what came to Emmy. Whether or no, the man has paid his forfeit. And you would leave Emmy to bear her share of it alone? You 're not the man I take you to be, Nathan, if you don't bring her over here before dark!"

Nathan brought her over. Emmy's mother magnanimously said the boy could stay a day or two, and Emmy, as magnanimously, allowed it, so that Nathan for that time might feel as he would have felt had the recruiting sergeant never been heard of. He did not know that every morning, as soon as he was gone afield, Emmy ran up the hill to comfort Davy. But at last Nathan went up for the boy himself; and, as he felt the little thin arms around his neck, he resolved he would care for the child for what he was to Emmy.

"It does seem 's ef I was ter hev a gran'child, to my age," said Emmy's mother, "it might 'a' ben suthin' diff'runt from this come-by-chance-like."

"What could you expec'?" said Nathan. "You let her marry."

"I let her! In ole times, w'en the' was witches, folks uster say the Prince o' Darkness come in the shape of —"

"Sho!" said Nathan. "You don't believe such trash, Mis' Ester?"

"Trash!" cried the exasperated little woman. "Don't ye b'lieve your Bible where it tells o' the prince o' devils? They cast out devils by the prince o' devils? You 'd orter know better, Nathan. You hed a good religious bringin'-up. You think because you ain't see thin's — w'y I woke up one mornin', 'fore sun-up, an' two great angels, with long wings, the color of a rose, was stan'in' ter the foot o' my bed. I seen 'em! But I 'm glad you come ter-day, 'stid o' ter-morrer. I would n't want the boy ter begin his life ter your house on a Friday, w'atever I think on him. Ef a child ain't possessed that sets up an' washes his face like the cat that 's a-spittin' at him, I do' know signs. He mumbles an' talks ter thin's in the air that I can't see!"

In spite of himself Nathan shuddered. There he sat now, mumbling and mouthing as the woman had said.

"What is it, Davy?" asked Nathan sympathetically.

The boy threw up his arms, his face flushed, his lips worked, his shoulders bent as with supreme effort, and all at once, beaming in success, "My dear daddy!" he cried.

It was what he had been trying to say ever since Emmy had said it for him. And Nathan caught him up and seated him on his shoulder, and Emmy burst into happy tears. Perhaps the boy was not so unlovely after all.

But with this, the force of some pressure, some bond, had been broken. The boy began to grow, his back to straighten, Nathan rubbing it every morning, since it saved Emmy from doing it. He could not but feel a tenderness for the little, soft, warm back under his hand. "There 's thin's a-drorin' the life out 'n him," said his grandmother. "He 'll be goin' out altogether like a shadder in the lookin'-glass." And then Nathan determined he should n't. He was vexed that he had been best pleased when Davy effaced himself. And yet, when Davy began to talk and asked his mother where yesterday had gone to, and where they kept the to-morrows, he had a new sensation of the uncanny. But that was fanciful; what was plain fact was that the child was a living evidence of Emmy's fault, and he wished to forget Emmy's fault; and, just as he would be thinking more kindly than usual of the boy, recollection would rush in and make it all unbearable. He tried to conceal it; but he knew that Emmy was conscious of it, and that was unbearable, too. When he saw Davy sitting on his cricket, looking out with wistful eyes, his self-reproach was disturbing.

And one day, one joyous day, little Than was born. In his happiness Nathan felt even Davy had rights, and was pleased with himself for that. He wondered how Davy regarded the newcomer. "I think my little brother will love me," said Davy, as if in answer. He brought the big hound, then, fear-

ful of his jealousy, and holding his collar, Davy thinking he helped on the other side. They disarranged the blanket by their movement, and one little pink foot protruded; and, when Ranger had looked the baby over, he thrust out his long red tongue and licked the tiny foot; and Davy hugged the dog and kissed his black nose, not at all to the dog's pleasure.

Nathan knew he would never be wholly happy till he should be wholly comfortable about Davy. But often lately he had seen a compelling sweetness in Davy; and then it was like a consecration for Davy to be the brother of little Than. As for the precious little Than himself, he developed an amazing precocity. He was as restless as the wind, as mischievous, as caressing. Emmy was radiant with him; Davy waited on his least caprice, and Nathan idolized him. Nathan wished to be just; but how was it possible!

One day Nathan returned from Salt Water, where he had carried a load of windfalls, and, when he came into the house, he took little Than on his knee and began to try a pair of red shoes on his pretty feet, and the child crowed with delight. What made Davy come then and lay his own, small, bare foot on Nathan's knee? Nathan took off the red shoes, and he did not bring them from their hiding-place till he had been down to Salt Water again and brought Davy a pair of bronzed shoes for his

very own. If that was justice, nevertheless he felt it something sweeter. He was quite pleased with himself.

The great storm had just cleared away, when Mrs. Ester came down from her eerie, having heard that the island — the long sea-bulwark of the marshes, whose sand-dunes received the perpetual onslaught of great seas, was being washed away. She wanted Nathan to harness old Blazes and take her down.

"I 'll never feel I 've got a clean floor ag'in 'thout my scourin' sand," she said. "I s'pose the sea 'll be a-breakin' over the ma'sh nex' storm."

"Why, Mis' Ester, the shore 's allers a-washin' away an' washin' back. The island 'll be there w'en we 're clean fergotten."

"Mebbe 't will an' mebbe 't wont; I ain't takin' chances. An' ter-day 's a lucky day, for I found a four-leaf clover w'en I opened the door, an' here 's a hoss-shoe I picked up, full o' nails. An' it 's goin' ter be fair, fer there 's spiders' webs on the grass. What say? I 'll take Davy an' give him a dip in the water. It 's only a dozen miles more or less."

"All right," said Nathan. "Emmy needs some, anyways," and presently they were off. And, after their bags were filled, Mrs. Ester working like a troll, they crossed for a sight of the white sea-horses racing up the reefs. And Davy was stripped for his bath, and went wading in a shallow cove; and directly there was a wild outcry, for the suck-

ing tides had torn out a shelf of sand and Davy had plunged out of sight.

In an instant Nathan was in the surf and struggling to reach the boy, already drawn out by the receding wave. It was not merely Emmy's boy; it was Davy! A stiff fight, but Nathan won!

"Oh, I had n't orter let him gone in," cried Mrs. Ester. "I 'd orter minded the sparrer that flew in the winder t' other day. It 's a sure sign. An' Ranger was a-howlin' all night; I heered him 'way up the hill. Oh, I hope he ain't took his death o' cold!"

And, when Davy was well rubbed, they made Nathan consent to be buried in the warm sand, Davy's little hands piling it unweariedly, his face full of concern, and his voice full of endearment.

It was strange; but having saved Davy, Nathan had the feeling of having given him life, and with it a novel sense of ownership that warmed his heart. He lay on the settle next day, with the hot headache of a heavy cold, while Davy changed cool cloths on his head, Emmy having all she could do to keep about, her ankle being sprained by a stumble over the sand-bags. Nathan laid a hot hand over Davy's, as it rested on his forehead, and held it there with a quickening sense that made his head throb more.

"Never mind the cloths, Davy," he said. "Set down an' tell me how you felt in the water. Frightened?"

"I guess I warn't frightened," said Davy slowly.

"Grandmother screamed; I didn't. I knew you'd git me."

It was not many days afterward that Nathan saw Davy standing on the gunning-float in the creek that in the evening light painted again the new moon, hung in the violet air. The boy stood up and bowed repeatedly.

"What's that you're a-doin' of, Davy?" he exclaimed.

"My grandmother said if I bowed to the moon nine times I'd have my wish," said Davy solemnly.

"That is heathen," said Nathan. "It's bowin' down to false gods. What did you wish fer, eh?"

"I — I wished my daddy'd love me," said the boy, turning to hide his face, "as much as he does the Child."

Nathan could not speak. Regret, anger, grief — too many thoughts came for uttering. "You're a good boy, Davy," he said at last, "if you do wish by the moon. You stay good, and everybody'll love you."

"Mother," said Davy, when he had said his prayers that night, "does God look like daddy?"

But if Davy was a good boy, it was more than little Than was. Lavish of caresses that meant nothing, of promises never kept, he defied everyone and obeyed no one. But he was full of taking arts and most engaging ways, with that flash in the tail of the eye that takes hearts — baby though he was — with

that melting voice. Hereditary psychology did not concern Nathan and Emmy; it was enough for them that he was a miracle.

"Ain't it time ye hed the Child christened, Nathan?" asked Mrs. Ester, waylaying her son-in-law.

"He'd orter b'en," said Nathan slowly.

"Chris'nin'," said Mrs. Ester with some chaotic notion of bell, book and candle, "might chase off the thin's that's a-puttin' him up ter pranks."

"We do' know jest how he 'll ack," said Nathan.

"I 'd know ef he was mine," said Mrs. Ester.

"He ain't," said Nathan.

"Look at him now a-teterin' on the well-curb, 'ith his heels up, ter see the gypsy face down there. Nex' thin' he 'll be in. Ef he was mine, which as you say he ain't, I 'd tweak his ear on the spot."

"Which ear?" said Nathan.

If watching his mother-in-law up the hill he thought that, with her clothes flying about her little meager shape, she looked like one who consorted with sprites and "thin's," he did n't say it.

He sat, that sunset, holding the Child, subdued by sleepiness into something tender, with Davy on the cricket beside the door, through which they saw the mown meadows in the yellow light, and farther off, lifted against sea and sky, the marshes ripe to redness, with stretches of umber and of emerald, ready for the morrow's reaping. Emmy, leaning on her crutch, was mixing her sponge and singing, lightly,

as if her old fugue were a dancing tune. She saw him smile at Davy, and she flashed back another smile. But he did not know he had smiled. He only felt his conscience clear, his heart uplifted, and the world a good place to live in. His small son was heavy on his arm, falling asleep, and Nathan silently said a little prayer of praise and petition for him. As he did so, his other hand rested unconsciously on the head of Davy, who had arisen from his seat and come to look at the sleeper, Ranger following.

When, an hour or two later, in the dusk of the purple twilight, Nathan happened to glance into the children's room, and saw the boy's head ringed over with its fair, short curls, and one arm thrown over little Than, he stole in and put his own arm over Davy and stooped and kissed his forehead. Nathan was a man of seldom kisses. It was in the dark but for the gleam of a great evening star that shone through the window and laid the shadow of a cross upon the bed; it might not have been easy in the light.

It was a few days later, when the men were just ending their nooning, that the gunning-float came round the curve, paddled by Davy. "My mother sent me!" Davy called. "The Child 's fell down the well. He 's out; but he hit his head and he won't come to." The sun shone in Davy's tears.

With a bound Nathan was in the float; but as instantly he had seen a small sailboat tacking upstream against the wind; he had hailed and paddled off to

it, and taken possession with the freemasonry of river-craft and was flying up the creeks. The currents did not run strong enough for him to conquer; the day, with its shining sun, its velvet azure, its gusts of fragrance; the white sails in distant creeks; the cows knee-deep in the sweet upland grasses — all were cruel in their indifference to his distress. "O my God!" he said over and over in his thought. "O my God!" as if adjuring the divine presence.

And the boy in the stern of the boat kept a wistful, loving look upon him, in some strange way feeling with almost a man's sympathy the depths of apprehension that Nathan was sounding and showing so plainly with set jaw and working muscle. He said nothing to him, but twice he put his hand affectionately on Nathan's knee and smiled courageously into his eyes, but Nathan took no notice of him, his whole soul having flown to little Than — his child.

The afternoon was pink in the west when Nathan sprung to the landing, Davy scrambling after. Emmy sat on the porch rocking the Child, who laughed, holding his arms to his father. Perhaps the blow on his head had changed the action of nerve or brain. "Than will never be drowned again," he said softly.

"He 'd 'a' b'en drowned this time, sure," cried Mrs. Ester, "ef Davy had n't run down them slippery rocks like a spider an' pulled him out. I could n't 'a' done it ter save my soul. That well was digged in the dark o' the moon. I 'd fill it in ef I was you.

Prob'bly the stream comes from some place where monstrous evil deeds was done. Yes, Davy got him, stun by stun. He 's come round all right."

"Davy," said Nathan, arresting the boy, "did you save my little son for me?" And he took Davy in his arms and laid his face on his. "Davy, my dear own eldest son!" he said.

"Ain't you glad you wished by the moon?" said the indomitable little grandmother with satisfaction. "Wal, I must be goin'. The 's thin's out arter dark."

JOHN-A-DREAMS

V

John-a-Dreams

"YOU would n't wish for a pleasanter person round the house," Mrs. Somers was replying to her gossip. "I never heerd him say so much as 'Why do you so?' to the cat. An' she 's a very masterly cat."

"He ain't spoke to Si Martin this twenty year."

"Si Martin 's b'en out West. He could n't very well. Si done him an ill turn oncet an' he ain't fergot it. That 's one o' his dreams."

"Wal — fer a perfesser — "

"Now, stop right there, Phœbe Ruggles. John 's allers said his religion warn't nothin' ter speak on, an' he ain't made no blow about it."

"He don't seem much like a deacon. Young fer one, anyways."

"Mebbe. But they jes' 'p'inted him 'count o' his gift fer prayer an' his singin' o' hymns. I guess likely he 's fergot w'at the diff'runce 'ith Si was about; but he ain't fergot there was a diff'runce. An' as he don' git mad in a year o' Sundays, reason was on his side mos' prob'bly. We was down to the foot o' the garding lookin' fer a brown-thrasher's nest in the brush-heap, him an' me; an' I says, 'Si Martin 's gone out West,' says I. An' he says,

'Glory go with him,' says he. 'I don't ever wanter hear his name ag'in,' says he. An' I ain't ever heerd him speak that name since. Here's Si Martin back ag'in to the ol' place, you 're a-tellin' me. Lost his wife? Only a gel left ter keep house fer him? I 'm pleased that it 's a mile or more away acrost the hills. But John 'll hev to pass the bread an' wine to him, ef he comes ter meetin', an' I do' know how he 'll do it! An' that 's a fac'!"

"P'r'aps they 'll go to chapel over there," said the resourceful Phœbe.

"Hope to goodness!" said Mrs. Somers, clapping the flour off her hands. "There! You stay to supper, Phœbe, an' see ef this rule ain't as good as yourn."

"Not ter-night; I 'm obleeged t' ye," said Phœbe, whose mind's eye saw further openings for her views in other places.

It was Mrs. Somers's proud but silent boast that her kitchen floor was as white as the tops of her tables, and its yellow walls unspotted. Perhaps it was the cheerfulness of all that whiteness and brightness and of her own large, fair personality that made Deacon Somers naturally reflect it. But, as his wife had said, he was a pleasant person about the house, and it was greatly to her surprise that her husband took his seat at the supper table without a word that night, and helped himself to the creamed codfish and baked potatoes without waiting on either his wife or the boys.

"W'y, father," said Mrs. Somers, "where 's your manners!" And at that he helped the others mechanically, wasting no words; and for a brief time a visible cloud settled over the table.

The silence was broken by the irrepressible Bud, who exclaimed, between mouthfuls, "They say Mr. Si Martin 's come back to the old place."

"I 'm willin'," said his father, without looking up.

"It don't reely sound as though you was," said his wife.

The man could have given her a glance that would have finished her happiness for this life. But he did n't. For how could you tell your wife that you hated another man because he won away from you the girl you meant to marry! Especially when your wife was as precious to you as your heart's blood. The girl had died, and so had her children, all but the last, and it did not signify now a tear's worth to him; but all the same he never wanted to see or hear of Si Martin again.

The soft June night with its starshine and shadows and flower scents cast its soothing spell over him and his irate mood of recollection, and when his wife came and sat beside him on the door-stone he slipped his arm over her shoulder. "I don' want no better wife 'an you be, Elviry," he said.

"My gracious, John, I sh'd think you 'd b'en a-questionin' of it!"

"Somehow the smell o' them syringys fetched back the nights w'en I went courtin', an' your aunt Lizy slyed along behind the bushes."

"Poor Aunt Lizy!"

"'T warn't no sign you was goin' to be throwed over 'cause Uncle Jed throwed her. She suspicioned the hull fambly, an' hindered us consider'ble. But she could n't hinder the summer evenin's, an' the smell o' the grass that was down, an' the little bird a-stirrin' in the nest an' sort o' complainin' on us. She did n't hinder that wind that come blowin' out o' the dark, full o' sweetness, an' blowed away into nowhere, an' made us feel as though it come from the land o' pure delight in the hymn — su'thin' about that dark nowhere that was what you may call a sweet trouble — made you feel sort o' glad, an' sorry too."

Mrs. Somers sighed. "'T was pleasant," she said. "Seems as ef sech times had orter last. They go so quick we don't half sense 'em. But there — we 're pretty happy as we be."

"We 'd b'en happier ef Bud had n't b'en a boy."

"Bud 's the best boy — " cried the indignant mother.

"He might have b'en the best gel, and anyways, I 'd 'a' liked a gel about. Sort o' bright an' tender like the sweetbriers growin' beside the rocks in the pastur' 'ith their little sweet blows. Yes, I 'd 'a' liked a darter. W'y, it 's awful, Elviry, to grow old an' not have a darter tu close yer eyes."

"How you dream, John! S'pose a tree fell on ye in the woods. Ef you hed ten darters they would n't be there to close yer eyes."

"I ain't ast fer ten darters."

"There 'll be darters-in-law bime-by, prob'bly."

"In-law!" he replied, with scorn. "What 's that beside your own? That are breath an' life to ye. That looks the way you 'd think angels 'd look."

"I do' know 's I ever thinked how they looked."

"That looks the way you useter w'en you was a gel, Elviry."

"W'en Rufe an' Bud fetches their wives home, we 'll be pleased, father."

"That 's a long wait. Rufe ain't half grown yet."

"He 's five feet twelve inches, John!"

"Sho! Ye don't say! Taller 'n Bildad, ain't he? Where 's my eyes b'en? 'Fly fast around, ye wheels o' time,'" he sang. "There 's them consarned whip-po'-wills beginnin'! One whip-po'-will in the dark is heart-breakin', 's you may say — sweetheart breakin'. But a swarm on 'em 's wuss 'n hornets. Le's go in." And he threw up his arms and stretched his great muscles for slumber as if he were some one else than a dreamer in the dusk.

The many mows were heavy with their fragrant hay — for their owner's idle fancies did not hinder his working like a giant in working-hours, and he

was a forehanded man. The thunder-storms came and went; the summer mornings were clear skies full of heaven, or green and gray and silver mists and rain; the world was fair, and life went well with Deacon Somers, and he was happy, except for that slight mist of melancholy which seems to be the complement of joy.

"Kind o' undertow," he said of it, "as the years go on, pullin' ye to the grave."

"I won't hear any sech talk!" said Mrs. Somers. "Undertow, an' graves, an' you in the prime o' life, 'ith your barns bustin', an' Bud 'ith the prize to the 'cademy, an' Rufe a-clerkin' an' layin' by an' likely to git the store to the village —"

"Oh, stop, stop!" her husband cried. "You 're makin' out sech a heap o' blessin's, I'll hev ter pull down my barns an' build bigger!"

"Sech talk 's jes' like lightnin'-rods to call the lightnin' down on your head. It 's a-temptin' Proverdence."

"What to? You think Proverdence 's that sort? Ain't you 'shamed?"

But now, out on the quaking heath where the accumulation of centuries of drift and leaf and moss had made a floor above the lake, through which here and there spurted a slight crystal fountain, the blueberries were ripe with pale-blue bloom over their purple lusciousness; and half the village were making their summer holiday there, raking the bounti-

ful harvest into bag and basket, lads and lassies, old and young.

"Now, father," said Mrs. Somers to her husband, who was gathering the berries, as he did everything else, without staying to breathe, with a notion that the ordaining powers had something else and unknown for him to do, "the world ain't goin' ter come ter an eend ter-night, and I 've got all I can put up for winter. So you go lay down on the bank, and I 'll visit 'ith Phœbe Ann some o' the folks I ain't seen sence last berryin'."

"There 's them I ain't seen sence Bates was hung," he replied, "an' don' wanter till he 's hung ag'in!"

"That ain't like you, father. W'y, 'tain't Christian!"

"You don't b'lieve in ghosts, do you, Elviry? Wal, I seen a ghost."

"The sun 's been reel hot on your head, father. You go lay down."

It was always the pleasantest part of the great neighborhood gathering to Deacon Somers when, duty done, he lay beneath a high-branching tree, and looked up through the interlacing boughs and felt himself a part of the shining life there, of the glints of blue and sun and darting wings; and his vague dreams were pleasant.

But to-day he did not dream. He had seen a ghost. He had seen Si Martin, pale, thin, downcast; although the wreck, yet the wreck of a certain beauty;

plainly a man who had come home to die, and to die soon. Somehow it was painful to John Somers that he hated that man. He slept at last, however; and it was between sleeping and waking, and more like pleasant dreaming, that he was conscious of some one like a blessed spirit, he would have said, or perhaps a young girl, perhaps that which might have been one's daughter, fading out of sight then; possibly, indeed, some one he had seen during the day recurring to memory in that border-land between sleeping and waking. It almost offset the disagreeable feeling with which he had fallen asleep. That night at home he could almost have wished some one would speak of Si Martin. But no one did.

John Somers had his rowen in from the fields where he had not turned in his cattle to browse; his apples lay in red and juicy mounds; and the smell of the cider-mill was abroad in the land.

"You ain't gotter go back to the store ter-night, be ye, Rufy?" said Mrs. Somers to her son, who had been at home to help in the apple-picking.

"Not to the store —"

"Oh, Rufy! Where then?"

"Mother!" the young man burst out impetuously. "She's as sweet as the wild roses —"

"That all?" And Mrs. Somers made a very unnecessary rattling of the milk-pans.

"She's as good as — as —" he paused, thinking

what there might be with which to compare his Lois.

"Well?"

"As you, mother! I don't know though, if anybody ever was as good as you," he said then, a loyal pride taking the place of his shamefacedness.

"My gracious, if she ain't no better 'n I be!"

Mrs. Somers put away the milk and came and sat beside her boy on half of the millstone that made the step of the back door. There was a pang in the mother's heart. This was giving away her boy, her first-born. But there came a thrill of joy, too, over her boy's happiness, of unrecognized pride that another woman found him all that she did. But still she knew that the husband follows the wife into her family, and it cannot be helped, and the tears came quickly to her eyes, unused to tears.

"She's a lonesome little thing," he said. "No mother, no sisters."

"That's good!" suddenly cried a great wave of relief in the mother's heart. She might keep her boy, after all. "The poor little thin'!" she said aloud with just as warm a wave. "She shall be my own child."

"Oh, I was cert'in you'd feel so, mother! But — but — mother!" — and he hid his face on his knees — "she's Martin's Lois!"

"Oh, Rufy! Oh!" — she waited a moment to recover from the blow — "oh, it can't never be!"

"It 's goin' ter be!"

"It 'll break his heart! Your father 's —"

"He 's allers bemoanin' that Bud ain't a darter. Here 's a darter for him. An' Bud ain't seen the day he —"

"'T ain't helpin' Lois, ter run down Bud. Bud 's a good boy," said his mother. "He 's reel tender of his mother, an' he thinks the sun could n't rise 'ithout his father."

"Bud 'd like her first-rate. So 'd you, mother."

"I ain't a doubt of it. So 'd your father, mos' prob'bly, ef he did n't know. I declare I 'm reel distressed."

"Mother! Ain't it too bad! An' she 's — she 's jes' — she 's jes' — Oh, you 'd say — She ain't a bit like him. He sez she 's her mother all over."

"Humph!" said Mrs. Somers. "She was a pretty creetur," she added. "But, there, she had n't no faculty. Slack!"

"Lois ain't. You 'd orter see."

"Oh, Rufy, this is trouble. You sure you can't git over it?"

"Git over it! Never till the last breath I draw. Nor then, neither. You do' know me, mother. You do' know *her*."

"Wal, I s'pose I shall."

Mrs. Somers carried a heavy heart to bed that night. Her handsome, steadfast boy! Her husband with his one bitterness! The girl who was to rob her

of her boy — child of that other woman, too! She turned her pillow again and again. "I never could sleep with the moon in the room," she said, as she saw the beams glancing on the bare sprays at the window, dancing like witches in the wind. And then the soft glow filling the room and working some magic with John Somers's sleep, he opened his mouth and began to sing — to sing as a sleepy child sings to itself — hardly more than a tuneful murmur, a measured breath — an old hymn they had learned at singing-school together. "Land o' Dreams!" sighed Mrs. Somers. "He 's in it, awake or not. The reel thin's can't hurt him much. It 's me that senses 'em. To have him carin' fer that gel for her mother's sake; that 's w'at 't will come to. An' me to see it an' feel it. Or else it 's to make my poor Rufy miser'ble all his endurin' days. Oh, there ain't no ch'ice about it!" And when at last she dropped asleep it was only to be haunted by a face she did not quite make out, a disappearing, phantom face, perhaps that of Si Martin's wife whom she had never seen, perhaps that of this unknown girl, dim and uncertain; and even in her sleep she was conscious of saying: "Lord o' Light, I 'm gittin' notional as father."

But her rye-cakes in the morning were as peculiarly well baked as her potatoes were, her ham was rich and tender, her pancakes were as golden brown as the maple syrup poured over them, and there was no molasses and milk boiled in her coffee, but the

clear stream ran upon cream that became liquid amber. For, as a mother indulges her defective child, she felt she must give this man of dreams and fancies every comfort she could devise; and the fact that she often enjoyed his dreams and fancies, and that he had been able in spite of them to make good provision for his family, so that she never had to boil the coffee over, did not change her feeling that his temperament was a weakness.

The summer, with all its moons riding low above the woods, had flown away before Mrs. Somers, in her divided mind and heart, could bring herself to act. She might not have been able to do so at all but for a sentence of the Elder's that kept ringing in her ears like a bell. "Evil is to overcome. The soul grows through struggle." Certainly her feeling about the girl Si Martin married was evil — she to be jealous of a dead woman!

But one day, after many private interviews in the dairy, in the pantry, returning from evening meeting, or when her son came for her at Phœbe Ann Ruggles's, Mrs. Somers took heart of grace. "I 'll do it!" she said. "I 'll do it, Rufy, termorrer."

"Father," her voice trembling, while on the next morning, with a towel about his neck and a sheet spread on the floor, she was cutting Deacon Somers's hair — "father, did you know that Rufus was thinkin' o' gittin' married?" she said.

"What!" cried her husband. "What say? Rufus? What you talkin' about!"

"Rufus. And the girl he is engaged to marry."

Rufus's father wheeled about, to the imminent danger of his eyes from the points of the open scissors. "What in the name of common sense — Why, Elviry, what you mean?"

"I mean w'at I say, father."

"Rufus? Why, you can't! It 's — it 's redic'lous. He ain't growed up. He 's — he 's — "

"Now, father, 'tain't no use to sputter this way. You set still! How can I cut 'ith you dancin' round like a teetotum? Rufus is a man — "

"A man! He ain't never hed a freedom suit."

"That 's because you ain't giv' it to him. He can look out fer himself and a wife too. They think everythin' of him to the store, an' they 'll take him in pardner soon 's he 's got his fust thousand in hand."

"Why don't he tell me sech thin's?"

"He 's scairt to."

"Wal — he 'd better be savin' 'stid o' marryin'."

"He 's got a very well-to-do father."

"Now, Elviry — "

"I know, John," she said, snipping a little carefully lest she snipped his ear — and served him right, as her impatient thought ran. "Course you don't wanter spile the boy — "

"Boy! You said he was a man."

"But when boy or man is all right you wanter help —"

"I do' know 's I do."

"*I* know you do. You 'll git cut ef you don't set still, father!"

"Our Rufe with a gel! Why, it 's only the other day he was in tiers. I can see him now — the pretty scamp! You 'd cut his hair, and he thought he was a man then —"

"An' mos' killed me, too — them curls!"

"His face was all ros'b'ry juice, an' he took a berry he was jes' puttin' 'tween his lips an' giv' it to me."

"An' you did n't take it, I 'll be boun'."

"Wal, no, I did n't."

"I did. Sweet little lips."

"Anyways, now, I can't seem to take it in. I don't b'lieve I b'lieve it."

"Wal, seein' 's b'lievin'," said Mrs. Somers, finishing her clipping. "An' he 's goin' to fetch her here to supper to-night. So you 'll see her. I 'm goin' ter lay a fire in the keepin'-room."

Deacon Somers had never seen nor heard of a nuptial mass; but a fire in the keeping-room seemed to invest Rufe's love-affair with a kindred solemnity. "I snum!" he said. And he stared at his wife as if he had alighted on another planet and was surprised to find her there. "Look here," he said, presently. "You seen her? No? Who is she? And

how 'd you know we 're goin' ter be pleased with her? S'pose we should n't think she was jes' the one? We gotter pertend it 's all right? This havin' strange folks come inter the fam'bly — W'y, mother, it 's upset all my cal'lations!"

"Did n't you ever dream the boys was goin' ter marry?"

"When we was old, maybe. But — The boys? You don't mean that Bud —"

"No, no," she said, laughing now. "I don't mean Bud."

"I declare I 'm all nervoused up."

All that day — it was a gray day, with snow on the ground and storm in the air: a boding day, he called it — while he was doing his chores in the barn and the wood-house, the masterly cat purring about his feet, the thought of the change hung round him like a pestering honeybee; sweet, but with a sting. More than once he made an errand into the kitchen. "Mother," he said, "you sure it 's so?" And by the early dusk, when he had finished his tasks, he was half bewildered. "My mind 's all catty-cornered," he said to himself. "Here I 've giv' shorts to Grip, and I 've sold the milch-cow when I meant ter sell the farrer. 'T was as good a bargain, though, as ever I made. So it 's all right. I do' know 's I 'll mention it to mother — right off. She sort o' sot by Brindle." It had seemed to him that afternoon as if night would never come.

"No, father, you ain't goin' to fix up one speck. She 's gotter take us jes' 's we be," said Mrs. Somers, when he suggested his Sunday coat.

"I 'm goin' ter hev a clean shirt and a dickey, an' my black stock, mother, ef I die nex' minute!" he replied. "An' you 'd look better 'ith your best gown on. W'en you wear your alpaca, and your velvet bunnet 'ith the feather, there ain't a more personable woman this side—"

"Would you like ter hev me dishin' up supper in a velvet bunnit an' feather?"

"I 'd like you anyways, Elviry."

"There, there, there, do go an' fix up, an' git it over!"

"Mother," he said, reappearing presently in the kitchen, an arrangement for his throat in either hand, "would you wear this stock or that cravat?"

"Oh, my goodness, John!" she said, with a laugh.

"Why, mother, I thought you 'd like ter say."

"I should think 't was you instid o' Rufe."

"'T is me! It 's me in my place."

"So it is, so it is," she said. "I 'd wear the cravat. The blue allers sets off your eyes."

"I thought you 'd think so," he said, triumphantly. "Blue that 's the color of heaven must give a pleasant idee," and he returned to the bedroom.

"Dear, dear!" said his wife. "And it 's sech a little time ago 't was him an' me. An' now — oh, I

s'pose it 's wicked, I do' know — but I ain't so much acquainted with the other place, and I wisht we stayed here mos' forever — an' was young." And then there came a jangle of bells, and she picked up the wick of the lamp and hurried to open the door, and the expected guest sprang from the pung to the door-stone — the sweeping of which had been forgotten — and fell into Mrs. Somers's arms.

"Oh, I did n't mean to!" cried a voice of silver. "I missed my step. Now I 've got your floor all over snow!"

"Never mind, never mind! That 's clean dirt."

"Oh, I 'll sweep it out soon 's I git this knot untied. Oh, you 're Rufe's mother!"

And her voice seemed to Mrs. Somers a music she had always been listening for.

"An' you are goin' to be his wife."

"An' we 'll have to love each other very much, 'count o' him." And the next instant the girl's cold face was pressed against Mrs. Somers's burning cheek.

And with that the bedroom door opened for Deacon Somers, and the girl withdrew and stood up before him like a young birch tree, straight and fair, and shining with her blond hair, her blue eyes, her glittering teeth, and the rose of the storm and wind not yet faded from her look, and he stood transfixed.

But he stood so only for a moment. He did not know quite what it was, what old emotion, what old

memory, swept through him; but it was pleasant. Pleasant? It was delightful. "You pretty creetur!" he exclaimed.

She took a step toward him, holding out her beseeching hands.

"Mother!" he cried. "Mother, I 've found her. I 've found my little darter!"

Perhaps Mrs. Somers's heart burned; but if it did she did not betray it. "She is mine, too!" she said.

"Oh, how kind you are!" cried Lois. "I knew Rufe's father an' mother would be jes' like this!"

And then Rufus came bustling in, ruddy, proud, happy but for the shadow of constraint; and presently the tablecloth was to be shaken out, and Lois sprang to help.

"It 's my own weave," remarked Mrs. Somers.

"Oh, how beautiful!" exclaimed Lois, brushing back her pretty, disordered curls. "I allers thought 't would be wonderful to weave."

"'T was simple enough," Mrs. Somers replied, deprecatingly. "I 'll show ye some day. The old loom 's up-garret. I wove the first gownd Rufus ever had on it. We don't do it now. It 's so cheap to buy — but my! there 's no life in 'em. They don't wear."

Supper was ready presently.

"Here, Lois," said Mrs. Somers. "Here 's your place; by me."

"No, no," said her husband, bringing his hand

down on the table. "My darter's place is here. She 'll set 'tween me and Rufe."

Bud looked at her appealingly.

"I 'll set here, I guess," she said, delicately.

"Wal, that 's nex' me, t' other side." And the blessing asked, in its unusual fervor, was more like a thanksgiving.

"You had your peach preserves a-puppus, I s'pose, mother," he said, following his wife into the pantry, when they rose from the table. "Peaches to peaches. An' Rufus got his'n. W'y, I ain't seen nothin' like her sence I went courtin' you. She 's a piece o' blue sky an' sunshine. W'en she smiles you feel 's ef the world was jes' made. Rufe 's showed reel good taste, ain't he, mother?"

"Splendid!"

"They 've gone inter the keepin'-room. Fire good there? I s'pose 't won't do to go there, too?"

"John Somers, ain't you no sense nor rekerlection?"

"Wal, it 's kind o' dreary a-settin' here an' jes' hearin' the wind blow. It 's a dretfle homesick sound."

"What you homesick for, father?"

But he began to sing "Jerusalem, my Happy Home," in a voice that had not yet lost its sweet sonority; and very soon Lois came out, Rufe following.

"I do love to sing," she said.

"That finishes it!" John Somers cried, as Lois joined in and took the air. "A live flute in the house!"

Rufus went out to harness and bring the horse to the door. The girl had her red hood on, and was tying her big cloak when he came in. "Father," he said, taking Lois's hand, "P'r'aps you don't know that this is Mr. Si Martin's daughter."

If in the next moment of dreadful silence John Somers turned white, his wife was whiter yet; and even Bud's breath hung suspended. Then all at once a great smile broke over his face; he never told his wife why, if he fairly knew himself; and he took the girl in his arms.

It required, in Deacon Somers's opinion, both Rufe and his father to get the girl home in the storm, and it was midnight when they returned.

"Mother," said Deacon Somers, as he toasted his feet, with a sense of well-being in the warmth, in the spiced sangaree his wife mixed for him, in the ruddy shadows of the fire dancing about the room, "I like to hear a storm roarin' on outside, w'en I 'm all housed an' happy. Poor Si Martin! I would n't like to die an' go out on sech a gale. He ain't long to live. I told him to-night — you ain't got no gretch agin' him, have you, mother? It 's wrong to keep a gretch; it is, cert'in. I hope you ain't. I told Rufe ter bring Si over here ter die comfor'ble — an' the gel — Lois. I don' s'pose any o' the angels was

ever called Lois? You don't mind? It 'll be more work — some — but she 'll help out. I feel to be thankful. I got my youth back, I got the very fullness o' my dreams, got my little darter an' my wife; and I 'm glad Bud 's a boy!" And while the storm swept its snowflakes by the window, like sparks of fire, Deacon Somers was on his knees, with his wife beside him.

MISS MAHALA'S MIRACLE

VI

Miss Mahala's Miracle

MOONLIGHT gave the Deacon's wife such dreams and illusions that she shut it out of her bedroom, although she remembered summer nights when she was younger and had loved to see a great moon hanging on balanced wings, like some mother creature brooding over the earth. She was suddenly wide awake with surprise, then, to find the light pouring in, and the Deacon sitting in it, his gray hair erect and shining like a crown, as he went over some papers, trying to decipher them in the gleam, and also trying to understand how two and two should make three instead of five, and to make out if by possibility he did not owe the parish so much as he had feared.

At her startled exclamation he closed the shutter and crept back to his pillow.

To this wife her husband was not only the best and first of men, but with so much of the ethereal in his composition that he seemed not so entirely human as heavenly. And if miracles could be wrought in these latter days, she would have expected him to work them or to have them worked for him. She had felt a deep reverence for him since the days when she had seen heaven in the fair-haired

boy's eyes and its love in his heart; she had preserved the unbounded pride in him that she felt when he asked her to marry him; and since the hour he became a deacon she had never called him by his Christian name.

She was a little creature, but, as a diamond holds the concentration of light, she in her energy was like a flame of fire. And while Deacon Wabbles was turning over the Elder's text in his mind and extracting its last honey, she was seeing to the practical side of things and keeping the Deacon's hands busy, wherever his thoughts might wander. Yet there were times when she suffered a sad loneliness — in the sunshine of those chill April days that fill the atmosphere with hope, when the Deacon was up in the hills by himself clearing the springs, and with she knew not what communings; or in rich, odorous autumn days when he tramped the swamps, elated with the colors and the balms, singing his thoughts out loud and clear — the loneliness any woman marrying an angel might feel. She did not know how to express her blind sensation of being left outside her husband's inner life. And nothing quite atoned for that. But now and then she hid her few quick tears on the shaggy head of old Laddie, and the dog looked at her afterwards with wistful eyes, as if wondering at her worry and assuring her he could keep a secret.

"What 's troublin' ye now?" she asked, laying

her arm over her husband, her voice as tender as a mother's — the wife in her long since become the mother.

"It 's them accounts, Drusy. I can't make 'em gee."

"What accounts you mean?"

"W'y, there 's on'y mine an' the perrish funds. And I can't make 'em come out to suit."

"S'pose *I* see."

"Now, Drusy, w'en *I* can't! I guess 't would take one o' them that counted times and times in Dan'l ter make them two thin's square."

"Can't you count right, father?"

"'T ain't countin'. I can count, same 's a clock. It 's jes' here. There 's that yoke o' noxen I bought. An' the bit o' lan' ter round out the big rye-field, and one thin' and another. And o' course I paid for them out 'n my own money. And my money 's all gone. An' where 's the perrish money? That 's gone, too."

"Deacon!"

"Yes. That 's jes' w'at 's occurred."

"Ain't you put it somewheers an' forgot?"

"I 've kep' it in the little right-han' dror of the sekertary this twenty year exceptin' for now and ag'in. 'T ain't likely I 'd remove it. And I ain't!"

"What has come of it, then?"

"Wisht you could tell me, Drusy."

"W'y ain't you spoke of it? — I thinked you was spendin' more 'n was likely."

"I could n't spen' more 'n I hed."

"S'pose ye sell the steers — "

"Sell them steers? W'y, I need 'em! I 've needed 'em like sixty this ten year, an' you gimme no peace till I got 'em. They 're my proputty, 'lowin' ther 's any sech thin' as property, seein' the 'arth is the Lord's."

"There 's a mistake been made, father. P'r'aps you thought 't was your money — "

"You s'pose I 'm a fool, Drusilla? Or a thief?" And he sat up in his righteous indignation.

His wife drew him gently down again, and held him in her arms, laying her head beside his own. "There, there," she said, "you go to sleep. Mebbe you 'll dream it out. Anyway, you kin see thin's clearer by day."

"There ain't nothin' ter see clear. It 's jes' here. I kind o' rekelek I put the perrish money away, I do' know where. And, anyway, it ain't there. I was in hopes I could make it out from what I had, till it turned up. But I can't. An' now all to wunst Elder an' Deacon Hardin' an' them wants it for the bell they 're be'n lottin' on 'ith Miss Mahaly's help, an' the fence roun' the buryin'-groun' — "

"There ain't no need of a fence there. Nobody can't get out; an' there ain't nobody wants ter get in, as I 've heerd say."

"Cows," said the Deacon.

"You jes' go ter perrish meetin' an' fight that fence!"

"I have."

"Father, how long 's this be'n goin' on?"

"Fer quite some w'ile, Drusy."

"An' ye never told me." And she rose and opened the shutters. There was no more sleep for her.

"W'at the use?" he said, on her return. "I was heckled enough for two. Anybody that did n't know me 'd say I 'd spent the perrish money. But I could n't 'a' done that no ways in the worl', ye see."

"I see," said his wife.

"But Hardin' won't see."

If the Deacon was unable to command ready money, it was because he never could put anything by while others were in want, and his family felt his least wish must be gratified — certainly so righteous a wish. And so his wife had turned her decent gown and re-turned it, and ripped and dyed his coat, which he wore with a consciousness of being clothed fit for the society of skyey beings; and Judith trimmed her bonnet over with ribbons the neighbors had had time to forget, and Lauretta cobbled her shoes for Sunday, and John gathered birds' eggs which he sold to bad boys down in Salt Water.

"I 'd be'n meanin'," said the Deacon sadly, "ter git ye a summer bunnit, Drusy. But now, 'ith Hardin' a-doubtin' my word —"

"Now, Deacon Wabbles, there ain't nobody a-doubtin' your word!"

"'T ain't jes' my word. It 's trust funds, Drusy. An' they 're gone. And I ain't got enough o' my own to square up. If I can't find 'em — w'y, mother, them childern o' ourn 'll come to disgrace! Folks 'll p'int to 'em an' say their father — mother, I ain't took any o' that money! Don't you believe me, Drusy?" And he sat up in the bed again, his gray hair making a halo round his head and his tears streaming.

"Believe ye?" she said. "Ye poor angel, don't I know ye could n't do wrong no more 'n a saint! You never said what warn't true in your life. You never did a thing 't warn't straight. If the Lord loves a righteous man, he loves you."

"An' whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth. P'r'aps I was feelin' 's if I could n't fall. Yes, Drusy."

"An' ye won't fall. You 'll be took care on, father. The Lord can't spare you an' your example that way."

"Mother, mother, what a comfort you are!" And he lay back exhausted, and was asleep in a twinkling. And old Laddie, on his mat beside the bed, beat taps with his tail, as if satisfied that all was right, even through a little sob which he rose to inquire into.

"Now you look cheerful," said their mother to the girls, as they made breakfast ready, by the candle-light. They had waked in the night and had heard enough to make it necessary to tell them more,

and their pretty faces were swollen with crying. "You put hot tea on your eyes. Father 'd be distressed ter see ye a-feelin' so."

"Oh, poor father, poor father!" Judith sobbed. "The saint alive, the old saint!"

"It 's dretfle!" cried Lauretta. "An' he the best man in meetin'!" And her tears were like sparks of fire.

"It 's jes' goin' to shame us every one!" said Johnny. "'T ain't no use bein' honest w'en folks suspicions ye that way!" And, trying to be calm, he broke out crying aloud.

"Folks ain't God," said his mother. "And God knows your father 's honest down to the ground."

"He 's honest up to the sky!" said Judith.

"There," said the mother, "the cakes are a lovely brown. You 'd better call father, Laurie."

The Deacon ate his breakfast in silence when he came. As he finished, he pushed back his chair and stood up. "Lord," he said, lifting his wide-open eyes to the window, where the sunrise flame still lingered, "thou art our refuge in all generations. Thou hast said, Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I come. I leave this trouble here. Let me feel that an honest man stands before Thee." And his wife and his children sobbed, "Amen."

As for the Deacon, there was only perfect peace on his white face. He went round and kissed his

wife, a rare ceremony. "Now," he said brightly, "it 's a good day for planting the corn, John, my son. It 's no use a-talking — in this here climate the Lord won't bless the corn that 's planted afore the apple blossoms sheds inter the hills." And he went out blithely as if he had not a care in the world.

"It 's up to God," said Johnny, who was reactionary and had been in Salt Water.

Across the woods the Elder was putting up his rails that a deer had disturbed. He had thought, as he saw the sunrise while coming along, that David first sang the twenty-fourth Psalm when a boy keeping his flocks on the hill at some splendid break of day, and he was singing to a tune of his own, "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in," for in this remote settlement, apart from the stir of the world, its complexities and distractions, the thought still concerned itself, as in days past, with the mighty things of the unseen. He was brought back to earth by Deacon Harding's and the tax-collector's approach, doubtless to talk concerning the missing parish funds. Well, if he could give them a kindlier feeling, he would be helping to lift those gates.

"There ain't no good o' hushin' it up," said Deacon Harding, after the preliminary conversation; "truth will out. The money was trusted to Deacon Wabbles, and if he can't perduce it, where is it?"

"Oh, he will produce it in time, I am sure," replied the Elder. "The Deacon may be a little confused. And he 's slow. He 'll clear it all up."

"So you said, Elder, three months ago. He 's had time."

"Eyther he 's got the money, or he 's spent it," said Cyrus Thomas, rattling the pennies in his pockets. "'T seems ter me somethin' 'd orter be done. It 's bringin' reproach upon the meetin'."

"Summer 's coming," said Deacon Harding, "and we need that bell. You can see for yourself, 't would soun' pleasant summer evenin's, callin' ter the house o' prayer an' biddin' in them that would n't 'a' come otherways."

"But that 's hypothetical. And it is n't to be thought of — is it now? — beside the blasting of a good man's name," said the Elder.

"I ain't denyin' he 's led a toler'ble good life — so fur," said the tax-collector, somewhat awed by the long word. "But tentations comes to all of us. He got his gels a seraphine last winter. I ain't ever felt called to git Sadie an organ."

"But he bought it that Judith might better sing her hymns. And don't you think Judith's voice in the singing seats is almost as well worth while as the sort of bell we would be able to buy?"

"'T ain't the question," said Deacon Harding. "An' 't ain't the bell. It 's the princerpul. If Deacon Wabbles has made away with our trust money,

we 'd orter know it, and have him dealt 'ith in meetin'."

"The Lord loves a merciful man," said the Elder. "If the case were reversed and either of us in straits, Deacon Wabbles would be long-suffering. I think we 'd better wait."

"Wal," said Deacon Harding, "mebbe you 're right, Elder. You 'd orter be, havin' studied inter sech thin's more 'n us. Deacon is slow, 's you say. P'r'aps he ain't took it all in yet. What say, Mr. Thomas?"

"We 've got a duty ter the perrish," said Mr. Thomas, still rattling his pennies. "However, I 'd hate ter hurt Mis' Wabbles's feelin's. An', 's you say, p'r'aps we — we —"

"Won't be too precipitate," said the Elder.

"Jes' so. But, Elder, sooner or later that money 's gotter be 'counted for. Some on it 's mine!"

The Elder was walking in his wife's little garden patch that evening while she sowed her mignonette seeds. "It is discouraging," he said. "It makes me feel my work idle and unblessed when two of my people are so ready to destroy another."

"For my strength is made perfect in weakness," said his wife softly.

"It is not impossible," the Elder said presently, "that while the Deacon was walking with his head in the clouds he set his feet in the bog. He is so occupied in the courts of heaven that he forgets the

things of earth." This from the Elder! thought his wife. "But he was very unhappy when I saw him last, the poor good man!" said the Elder. "Yet his wife had n't the first doubt all would come right. That 's a great help. What wonderful things wives are! And her price is above rubies."

It was quite dusk when the Elder's wife rose, dusting the earth from her fingers. "Well," she said, "if that money has been spent, I don't see how anything but a miracle can replace it."

"What then?" said the Elder, gazing at the evening star, that through the gently swaying branches seemed like a great golden spirit winging its way towards earth. "What then? Can't we think there are laws that are deeper, swifter, subtler, mightier, than those we know, that can produce what we call the miraculous? Miracle or no miracle, it stands to reason that for a man who lives so near heaven the heavenly forces ought to be engaged." And the Elder's prayer that night dealt with the heavenly forces very pleadingly.

The buds on the orchard boughs were like points of light against the dark forest the next morning. The rosy snow of apple blossoms blew about; the world seemed full of hope and promise. The Elder's wife sat sewing on the porch with Miss Mahala. "Yes, it means a sight to me," Miss Mahala was saying. "It means longings. It means tears. Yes, Mis'

Perry, tears," glancing about anxiously. "Elder ain't 'roun' — fixin' his remarks? Talks 'temp'ry, now I mind. Fetches ye nearer, mebbe. Though once in a w'ile a good thirteenthly stirs ye up. P'ints ter dispute."

Miss Mahala had long since become a personage in the Settlement. She had bought her small place with what was left of her father's property, and she had sowed and threshed and grown brown as a berry and spare as a tree's stem. She sold eggs, herbs, snake-skins, curious fungi; she lived on next to nothing, and she saved now and then a dollar. When she should have saved a hundred dollars, she used to think, she would have a little all-sorts shop. She had kept her money about her, and in hot mid-summer she talked of the deceitfulness of riches and longed to spend hers. "Yes, in them days I thought I 'd like ter run down ter Salt Water an' see the stores," she said. "I thought I 'd like some preachin', too — 't was afore Elder come. I thought I 'd like to susscribe an' take the 'Farmer' all to myself, 'stid o' having it 'ith the neighbors, an' gittin' it worn an' crumpled, 'ith the news all read out of it. I thought, yes, I did, I 'd go to the circus. Ever been? Script'ral an' Biblical show, ye know, camels an' cameleopards an' behemoths; an' if the women-folks rides pecooler, that ain't the fault o' the critters. I 'm boun' ter say I like to see w'at 's goin' on, so long as it 's goin' on! Wunst — I 'll

tell the hull truth — I did think of a black silk gownd. I got so far as to hear myself a-rustlin' in it Sabbaths. But I did n't purchase. And at last I had a hunderd dollars. A hunderd dollars ain't much, prob'bly, ter the eyes that sees all the gold o' the 'arth, an' where the Queen o' Sheby got hern. But 't was a sight to me. An' then — that 's the way thin's happens — to them that hath shall be given — my uncle over to Stowe up an' — passed away — an' lef' me — hm — hm — a comf'ble competency. An' there I was 'ith that an' the hunderd dollars too. I did n't feel, ye know, ter spend Uncle Jairus's money; but that hunderd dollars was mine, and I cast about ter see w'at I could do 'ith it. There 's times w'en a trifle o' help means salvation to some folks. An' I made up my mind ter lend it out, askin' no interess, to people a-strivin'. The fust one was — wall — never mind who. He was a carpent'rin'. An' he hed idees, he said, if he on'y hed money. An' w'at do ye think come to pass? He traded fer a lot o' furnitur' jes' out the fact'ry, made like the ole-fashioned bureaus, ye know. An' there he was a-dentin' and a-bangin' of 'em, and a-rubbin' dust and oil inter the cracks, an' leavin' on 'em out in the rain till they looked as if they 'd stood in the barn-chamber sence John Hancock come over. Mis' Beers said it went right to her heart ter see Ezra a-ruinin' them new thin's and her best room as bare 's your hand. An' he set 'em roun' the house and up garret,

two or three to a time. An' then he sold 'em, reel artfle, to city folks a-travelin' roun', for prices big as Achan's wedge o' gold. I warn't goin' to stand that. Reg'lar swindle. And as he hed n't the money, I took the furnitur'; and then them city folks — sech fools folks be — come meechin' roun' ter me. They could n't believe the truth; said 't was plain impossible. There was the thin's! An' they carted off a clock or a sekertary, and lef' what they called an hones' price unner the door w'en I slammed it. Useter think I was feeble-minded. Then I had to wait for my cruse to fill, and I let Joel Bush — there, I did n't mean ter mention names! Wal, I lent to one and another, and ushully they did n't pay; they took it out in sayin' 't warn't no use ter have dealin's with a woman. But I ain't ever spent my interess money, and I 've got it where I kin lay my hand on it any minute," suiting the action to the word. "An' now, Mis' Perry, you 've hearn o' this trouble o' Deacon Wabbles?"

"Something of it."

"So. Now I know the Deacon, root and branch. He 's as honest as sunlight. Ye kin see clear thru him. I 'm thinkin' o' visitin' there bimeby and a-slipping that money unner some papers in his sekertary, or inter some book, and ast Mis' Wabbles ef she 's looked everywhere and in amongst them papers. Deacon won't never sense it. He 'll think he left it there! You see he 's all mixed. He does n't know

his'n fum theirn nor t' other fum w'ich. But he 's allers right on the four points, let come what will. I guess his scan'alizers 'll be took aback w'en he comes out atop, 'ith that money."

"Miss Mahala, you 're a genius!" cried Mrs. Perry, after an instant's gaze.

"I do' know but w'at I be," said Miss Mahala, smoothing her gown, "and I do' know *as* I be."

"But you 'll lose it — all that money!" — the Elder's meager salary giving the sum a phenomenal weight.

"Calherlate to. In a good cause. I can't hev such a scandle on the meetin'. I gotter save this perrish from reproach. But I come acrost lots ter see what ye 'd say to it. Fer I don't want ter do anythin' ag'in lor and order."

"I think if they give the Deacon time —"

"He 'd straighten out. Yes. I think jes' 's you do. But time kills, you know, in the waitin'. Wal. So I 'm goin' over. I got the money here. An' I can trust you and Elder not to tell on me. Fact is, I never ast a merried woman not to mention thin's to her husband, because 't ain't no use. I know she will. I expect the Deacon 'll be ter see the Elder afore nightfall. It 'll do my soul good ter see Mis' Wabbles find that money. An' them poor children, a-feeling disgrace a-hanging over 'em — their faces 'll be like beaming roses nex' Sabbath. I could n't enjoy

that money anything like if I kep' it in my stockin'. Tell me now, could I?"

"How good you are, Miss Mahala!"

"No, I ain't. I 'm jes' givin' Mahala Brooks a treat. I declare to man, 't will be a joyous occasion w'en I see the Deacon, straight 's a tall pine, stan'in' up nex' Sabbath and a-singin' as if he 'd lead the hull flock on us up the heavenly heights! An' I guess Mis' Wabbles won't be sorry that day she did n't take up 'ith Hardin' w'en he ast her. No, I ain't good. For I do' know but I 'll enj'y puttin' Deacon Hardin' an' Cy Thomas an' their folks ter confusion 'most as much as savin' the Deacon."

It was an hour or two afterward that Miss Mahala came light-footed to Mrs. Perry's door again. It was joy and not the spring day's heat that flushed her face. "I 'm beat out," she said, as she sat down and untied her bonnet-strings. "I 'm beat. Now then. I made my call, Mis' Perry. An' in the course o' talk I ses ter Drusilla, 'You looked everywhere?' ses I. 'Everywhere,' ses she. 'Looked thru all them books on the sekertary shelves?' ses I. 'S'pose ye lemme look! I 'm a master hand at findin' things,' ses I. And I did n't wait, but went inter the keepin'-room, and took down one book and another, and held 'em up by the covers an' did n't find nothin', and I 'd jes' slipped them bank-bills inter Scott's 'Commentaries' w'en the Deacon come in himself. 'Deacon Wabbles,' ses I, 'I don't believe ye ever thought

o' lookin' in them 'are books fer that money.' I'd thought he'd be dretfle disconsolate; but he warn't; he was all up in the air. 'W'y, no, I ain't,' ses he. 'I ain't in the way o' puttin' money inter books,' ses he. ''T won't do no harm ter see,' ses I. 'Folks doos lots o' thin's absent-minded like. There, you take this pile, and I'll run thru this. There ain't a dozen on 'em, hymn-books and all.' An' jes' 's I was a-slammin' down 'Hobbs on Reverlations,' the Deacon cried out. An' he was like some one jes' raised from the dead — stiff's a piller o' salt. An' there was my money unner his hand. 'My dear Lord! My dear Lord!' he was a-sayin'. 'Drusilla! Here! I never — yet p'r'aps I may — I do' know — I kind o' remember — Yes, yes!' he ses quick. — ''T was the day I was near stunned a-fallin' off the load o' salt hay we fetched in over the ice from the medder,' he ses. 'Yes, now I remember puffickly. Oh, thank God, thank God!' An' thinks I, 'Wal, he remembers, does he? All right, then.' But Mis' Wabbles warn't noways supprised; she was as calm 's a clock; 't warn't nothin' beyond her expectations that meracles should come to pass for the Deacon; but her tears was a-pourin' — tears o' triumph. An' Judith stood as if she was turned to stone 'ith joy. An' John came a-bustin' in to the top o' his voice, an' Laddie he begun yelpin' an' jumpin' 's if he'd knowed it all along, an' Lauretty plumped right down on the floor off'rin' thanks. If

they ain't all sick a-bed to-morrow, I miss my guess! An' the Deacon happened ter run his fingers over the leaves 'ithout thinkin', and there, if you 'll believe it, was another set o' bills — the very bills, I s'pose, he 'd put in there an' forgot where, thru that fall o' his'n. He was whiter 'n a sheet of paper. 'It 's a meracle!' ses he. 'It's a meracle!' And he was gladder ter think the Lord 'd worked a wonder for him than he was to find the money. So I come away —"

"And left your money! And said nothing!" exclaimed Mrs. Perry.

"Certain. Jes' that. S'pose I 'd take his meracle away from him? Mis' Perry, you have the Elder give out the las' varse o' the hymn —

> "'Thou shalt call on him in trouble,
> He will hearken, he will save,
> Here for grief reward thee double.'

I see the twinkle in Elder's eye w'en he reads out that 'ar' third line. He can't help it, Elder can't; he may be a saint, but he 's a man first. I do' know — w'at d' ye think? — p'r'aps Deacon Hardin' an' Cy Thomas and the others 'll be moved ter go up and take Deacon Wabbles's han'. He won't hold no gretch; they was in the way o' their duty. And if you feel the leastestest mite like chucklin', you 'll jes' chuckle ter yourself, won't ye?"

"The Elder 'll be afraid I 'm losing my head."

"The Elder 'll never be afeared o' anythin' exceptin' that you 'll git to heaven afore him. If ye do, jes' reach down a han' ter help me w'en I come climbin', won't ye?"

AN OLD FIDDLER

VII

An Old Fiddler

THE old man leaned his head caressingly towards his fiddle, as he sat by the fire in the big kitchen. Outside, the rising wind was threatening storm, and every now and then a vibration of the gusty air breathed through the fiddle and murmured on the strings.

"I do' know w'at I 'd du ef I could n't hear your leastestest whisper," he said, softly, to the instrument. "I 'd ruther die than be deef, I would."

"Dear land! I 'most wisht *I* was deef," muttered the young woman in the lean-to, her arms elbow-deep in soap bubbles, as she bent over her tubs. It was going to storm, but washing must be done on washing-day. "Mornin', noon, an' night, nothin' but fiddlin'! An' the 's kindlin's ter be split, an' water ter fetch, an' cows ter fodder, an' no one but Seth ter du it all. An' Gran'sir ain't a speck too old ter help. But there!" And she spent the rest of her exasperation in wringing the sheet so dry it hardly knew it had been wet. "It 's aggravatin' ter hev jes' the other thin' fum the thin' ye want," she went on. "The sound of a pair o' little patterin' feet 'd 'a' be'n a sight pleasanter 'n all the music outen that fiddle! An' sometimes your arms fairly achin' fer

the heft of w'at they ain't got!" And the next piece she washed was very clean indeed.

The strains of the violin came lightly in "Whistle o'er the lave o't." If there was a delicate irony in the intonation, as the old man smiled to himself, the hearer did not know it, and it did not abash a couple of yellow kittens that scrambled about his shoulders and put up their backs at the voice of this other purring creature. "You're 'most as good as sunbeams," he said, presently, to the cats.

"There it goes," said the young woman to herself again. "Here I be a-renchin' of the clo'es ter music, and I guess the fire 'll keep time a-b'ilin' of 'em. It 's w'at he 's be'n doin' his life thru. Ef 't warn't fer that fiddle all this land 'd be'n cleared an' down ter wheat afore ever Seth was born. Seth can't du everythin'. It 's enough ter pervoke a saint, let alone me. And I ain't no sort of a saint!"

She was right. She was n't any sort of a saint; although Seth had often said she was the best of wives.

"They don't make 'em any better 'n you be, Kitty," he said once.

"My! You must n't talk so," she had replied, winding into place the big fallen braid of satin-sleek black hair. "Suthin' might happen!"

"I s'pose ye think the Lord 's watchin' out ter trip me," he had said.

"Seth McGregor, you make me scairt! It soun's jes' like Gran'sir!"

She could say nothing stronger, he knew. But he had laughed and finished his hot doughnut, and wiped his mouth and kissed her, and had gone off to his ploughing, and she had gone back to her rolling-pin. "I'll make 'em all han's," she said. "Seth likes 'em crisp. But then Gran'sir, he likes the hole. Land sakes, I did n't engage ter tend out on two on 'em! Though I do' know 's I 'd mind ef 'twarn't fer that fiddle. P'r'aps I ain't no ear for music. Dear knows w'at I 'll du in heaven, 'ith all the harp-playin' there. — I 'd better git there fust, though. I shan't, s' long 's I let this everlastin' fiddlin' stan' in my way."

But, indeed, how could you say it was pleasant, when you were quite down and out of sorts, to have the tune of "Smile again, my bonnie lassie" strike up and insist on being heard? Or when you were gazing over your knitting, wondering how a man could be so thriftless, to have the "Jolly Beggar" come laughing out as if he read your thoughts so that it made you creepy? And what could be more calculated to stir one up than, when on a lovely spring morning you had to be over the hot fire, to hear that bow of his going on about the cool green "Birks of Aberfeldie"? No one could say it did n't set the nerves on edge, when you had been scrubbing the floor, and knew you would have that floor to scrub the rest of your mortal life, and your cotton gown was all soaked and dripping, to have

the fiddle begin "An' ye sall walk in silk attire" — when you had never had a thread of silk on your back!

When Gran'sir came into his father's forest-land up here, he had a chance to farm it like Asher's folks, for the hills just dropped fatness on that land. But no; he scratched the ground for enough for to-day, and let to-morrow take care of itself, — to-morrow now having come to mean Seth and Kitty. And now Seth had to delve so he could hardly take a day off and go to the beach and get her scouring-sand. Her poor man, — her dear man! And what came of it all — his delving, her scrubbing? They kept body and soul together, and no more. If Gran'sir had done different, instead of running in every hour or so, all his young days, for a tune on his fiddle or to turn the slip of wood he was drying in the sun for another fiddle, Seth might be driving his own team now; he might be selectman; there'd be another story on the house, and green blinds, and glass in the front door, maybe; and her best dress wouldn't be that alpaca she had when she was married; she might go round cracking in her silks like Denison's folks. And the old man would play on, apparently unaware of these sinister reflections, or of the steady disapproving gaze across the knitting-needles. Sometimes, indeed, he played wild, sweet dance-tunes, and called out the figures as he used to when he played for the boys and girls in the barn

dances of his youth, and it seemed then to his listener as if the very witches and warlocks of Tam o' Shanter were capering in her outraged kitchen. Sometimes, instead, he had said: "Now you shall hear what the wind ses on a summer night — a night of August. Hear it now come over the tree-tops, murmurin', murmurin'"; and she had remembered a "going in the tops of the mulberry-trees," and had heard the soft summer wind rush down in the dark and lift the great boughs; and now it swept the fields of the bowing grain; and now she knew it passed over the drooping heads of flowers and brushed away their dews, and went on heavy with fragrance; and now she heard a whippoorwill cry like a flute, and now the strain rose and seemed to shake the stars.

"Wal, 't ain't no use," she said to-day, wiping the suds off her arms. "Dear knows I don't want ter send any of Seth's folks ter the poor'us, leastways the only one he 's got — if he do deserve it. And Gran'sir 's mortal proud there ain't never be'n a McGregor in the poor'us. He doos jes' despise the poor'us. It 's comfort'ble down there, though, an' lots of other old men ter talk an' fiddle to. But there! he could n't go 's long 's he 's got his pension. And I don't begretch him his vittles. I don't begretch him nothin'. I like him roun' — leastways, 'most allus. But Gran'sir ain't done a stroke of w'at ye might call work sence Seth could du it for him. Lord o' love! I 'd orter be 'shamed ter be put about

so by nothin'! I would n't mind so much ef Gran'-sir was an ol' woman — though I cal'h'late she 'd allus be a-meddlin'. An' he don't meddle — much. But then she would n't be a fiddlin'. But 't ain't jes' nothin' " — the flood of her thoughts eddying back like a river among rocks — " ter find out, the way we did yist'day, that long and long ago Gran'sir sold that land round the hill, thet Seth always thought was his'n, where there 's talk o' the rail-road going thru, for a fiddle! And all he 's sorry for 's thet a tramp stole the fiddle. Lor'! w'at a fool I be!" And she tied a shawl over her head and shoulders and went to hang out her clothes.

She was holding with both outstretched hands a sheet flapping stiffly in the wind, a clothes-pin between her teeth, when with a jingle of bells the old yellow stage came slipping along on its runners, as if chuckling to itself over the disappearance of its noisy wheels. " I declare I 'm gittin' silly! I thought 't was that fiddle," she said.

The stage stopped. " Guess the 's suthin' fer your folks," the driver shouted. " The 's a passel fer the ol' gentleman." Climbing down, he thrashed his arms a minute before overhauling his load.

" There 's Mis' Somers's trunk," said he. " She 's be'n down to Salt Water. An' Mis' Elder Perry's ban'box, — guess she 's got a new bunnit. That 'ere 's the bresh Square Davison 's sent to Elder fer a Chrismus-tree, — 's ef there warn't wood next his

door. Kind o' papish. But makes business. Square's sent two loads ter market. Gits ten cents apiece. Here ye be!" and he left a long, thin box inside the drift, reorganized his load, encouraged his passengers, and jingled off. "Looks like a spell o' weather," he called back cheerfully.

"My goodness!" said Mrs. Kitty. "W'at 's ter du now?"

Kitty hastened up the slope, letting a great breeze into the kitchen, and leaving the door open. The old man rose and closed the door. Then he untied the box with deliberation, winding the various strings into little rolls, after he had amused the jumping kittens with them for a few minutes.

"Gran'sir! Du make haste!" she exclaimed.

Then he took off and folded paper after paper. "Handy, sometime," he said. At last he lifted out a shabby green violin-case.

"Gran'sir!" she almost shrieked, twisting her hands as she watched him. "You hain't be'n spendin' yer pension-money fer another fiddle!"

"I give my pension-money to your man the day I sign for it," he answered, with some dignity, yet too pre-occupied to be offended. "This means thet my ol' cap'n 's gone. We was to the Mexican war together. You 've heern me tell —"

"O Lor'! yes, Gran'sir!"

"He promised, w'en he was done 'ith it, thet I should hev his fiddle. An' here it is. He 's done 'ith

it. And I 'd ruther 'a' played on the old one I made myself out'n a piece o' pine and a piece o' maple, till kingdom come, than hed this an' knowed he won't play on it no more. By mighty! he made it sing! Oncet I reckoned I 'd like ter hev it, — but now — wal, I shan't ever play on it onless there 's an occasion thet 's more out o' the common than 's likely now. Wal, wal! They 're all goin' thet ain't gone. I ain't done nothin' but walk acrost graves this forty year." And he sat down, trembling, and trailing the bow, a far-away look in his big pale eyes that made Kitty tremble, too. She hurried and beat up a flip for him, surprised at herself.

The old man woke from his reverie as she brought it, startling the kittens, who were examining the bow with doubting paws. "By king! I 'd ruther have give a dollar than hed the Cap'n die," he said. "I warn't in the way of seein' of him, but I knowed he was on this breathin' yarth. I 'd orter went fust, I hed. He 'd orter gin the word and I step forrud. — You 'd orter took me!" he exclaimed, suddenly, as if to the universe. "Don't seem 's ef thet gre't fire in him could 'a' be'n blowed out," he added, more quietly. "He was alive clean thru, the Cap'n."

Kitty went out and banged the door behind her. He might take his flip or leave it. "But there! he felt reel bad, did n't he? Oh my! thin's won't let me be good, no matter how I try! 'T aint no time sence I see a mouse a-settin' in the crack listenin'

to him a-pickin' on the strin's. 'Let him alone,' he ses. 'I 've sujergated him. I 'll hev him singin' yit,' ses he. And I scairt out'n my five wits by a mouse! Sometimes I think so I 'd like ter hev my home ter myself! But then again I do' know. My goodness! this ain't no sperrit fer a perfesser! But it 's hard livin' up ter thin's 'ith Gran'sir argyin' 'ith the Elder, an' sayin' the Elder 's easy satersfied. I kin hear Elder now a-sayin', 'Have you anything better to offer me, McGregor? Then, if you have n't,' he ses, 'don't take away w'at I have,' he ses. An' Gran'sir says, 'That 's right!' jes' 's ef he wus pattin' Elder on the back. It 's hard, fetched up as I 've be'n, ter hear Gran'sir's talk sometimes in my kitching."

The clothes on the line swayed solemnly. "They 've froze harder 'n Pharaoh's heart a'ready," said Kitty. "I 'll hev ter let 'em freeze dry. An' then they 'll tear ter slits a-gittin' of 'em off'n the lines. Land alive!" — as the sound of sleigh-bells came again — "ef there ain't Elder Perry! An' me all sozzled and drozzled! That 's jes' the way thin's happens. Dear sakes! w'y could n't he 'a' come some other day than wash-day! I don't care — it 's good ter see Elder any day," her interior consciousness added.

The Elder came bustling up, with his arms full. "I don't believe you 're real glad to see me, Mis' McGregor," he said, when within. "And I did n't

like to come to-day, for I know you 'd wash Monday if the world was to end Tuesday. But the fact is — The way the women wrap up a baby in cold weather — I would n't like to have a child suffocated — under all these cloaks and veils. I 'll give it a breather, and maybe you 'll warm a drop of milk or some cream and water for it. Here 's the bottle." And he was stripping off and scattering layer after layer of old shawls and blankets, and there came a little gurgling sound, and a gleam of something pink as a blush-rose, and there was a baby — a beautiful bouncing baby.

"Oh!" said Kitty, pushing in front of Gran'sir, "ain't it a little dear? Whose is it? Where you goin' 'ith it? W'y, Elder, you 're awful handy 'ith a baby!"

"Served my apprenticeship. There! Ain't that a fine child?"

"It 's a beauty! A reel darlin'! How old is it? Six months? Eight? It 's most oncommon big fer that. Shan't I take it? 'T ain't much heftier 'an a cat. My! Ain't there more 'n this ter babies? Do you s'pose it 's all right?"

"Right as a trivet," said the Elder. "She 's poor old Mis' Deacon Hills's granddaughter, and she has n't anybody kin to her this side of heaven. Good stock, you see."

"But most misfortunate," said Gran'sir.

"Yes, I 'm afraid Mis' Hills would have gone on

the town if she'd lived. But she would n't hear of it —"

"Too blamed independent," said Gran'sir. "I like her sperrit."

"Well, she won't go now," continued the Elder. "But it would be hard on Mis' Perry to keep this baby, with six of her own; now would n't it? The almshouse is n't far from here. But I 'll toast up a spell before I go. And perhaps Mr. McGregor 'll let me hear what his violin has to say about it. By the way, I often wonder what the weather really was that night in Bethlehem."

"Heavenly weather," said Gran'sir, — "thet is, ef thin's was as you say they was."

"With part of heaven coming down," said the Elder. "You warming the baby's feet, Mis' McGregor? There 's nothing prettier than a baby's feet."

"The poor little soul! What color do ye call her eyes? She 's lookin' at me solemn 's a graven image. You can't say yit? Ef that ain't jes' like a man! They change in the fust months? What a lot you know, Elder!"

"Well, six of them are educating," said the Elder.

"I du hope it 's goin' ter hev blue eyes," said Kitty, as she warmed the milk. "I allus thought a blue-eyed baby was a picter. Seth's eyes are blue. I s'pose I don't desarve it, or I 'd 'a' hed one o' my own."

"We don't always deserve our blessings," said the Elder.

"My! But she's hungry, the sweet lamb!" she said, taking her rocking-chair.

"She's sort o' pooty," said Gran'sir, looking over the arm of the chair.

"Sort o'!"

"Too pooty fer the poor'us, anyway."

"It's a shame!" cried Kitty, her eyes flashing.

"So it is," said the Elder. "But what else can we do? I'd like to find her a home with some good people who haven't any children, and who have nothing but a silent house and a lonely old age to look forward to —"

"Yes. The Bible sez a babe in the house is a well-spring of pleasure."

"Well — ahem! — not the Bible exactly. But a very good man, I've no doubt. And I'm sure the — the Bible authorities would — would agree to it. For a child does make cheer. And it costs little or nothing before it's old enough to help. This little girl 'll be a sight of help in a few years."

"She 'll be a sight o' care fust."

"Mis' Perry never seems to find them much care."

"Elder Perry!" she exclaimed, turning her head over her shoulder like a frightened bird, perhaps at the thought that Seth might come in, "I b'lieve you 've fetched this baby a-purpose ter temp' me ter take it!"

"Well, Mis' McGregor — That is — I mean —"

"Oh, I don't b'lieve but w'at I'd like ter!" she cried. "Only I guess the Lord knowed my temper was too onsartin ter be trusted. But I'd try. My gracious! would n't I try! Oh, it 's no use. Seth 'd never let me in all this world o' worlds. He 'd say I warn't made fer it, he could n't afford it, he could n't hev me pestered, I warn't fit. And I 'd try reel hard ter be fit —"

"Tryin' 's better 'n bein', any day, Kitty," said Gran'sir. "Them innercent creeturs w'at 's born all right can't hold a candle to them that 's grown all shiny strugglin'."

A melancholy wind sighed round the eaves.

"Jes' hear it!" said Kitty. "It allus makes me feel reel down w'en it comes up that way."

"'And there came a great wind from the wilderness,'" said the Elder. "Yes, it is getting rough outside. Perhaps you could make out to keep this little lady till the storm 's over!"

"I wonder what Seth 'd say. I could make her up a little bed in the clo'es-basket. I 'd put the pink spread in — I made it 'fore I was merried — it 's lined with lamb's wool; an' then a couple o' pillers, an' set the bedroom door open —"

"You might try it," said the Elder.

"I guess she 'd be reel comfortable."

Gran'sir picked up the yellow kittens and put them on her lap beside the baby, who instantly left her

bottle and reached for them with an inarticulate cry of joy.

"Oh, cats!" said Kitty. "W'at 's cats w'en you've got a baby? I s'pose them kitties 'd be gittin' inter her bed, too. Do you think cats sucks a baby's breath, really? I'm awful afeard o' cats."

"No, indeed. They would n't let so much as a bird come near a baby. They just like a warm nest."

"If she should cry in the night an' wake Seth up—"

"'T would take more than her little pipe to wake a man as tired as Seth."

"He needs his sleep, you know," she said, anxiously.

"He needs a little daughter to brighten his declining years."

"A little daughter! Oh my!" Her eager eyes were searching space. "A little daughter—"

"You could name her, you know. You could call her after Seth's mother—"

"I do' know about that. I did n't set so much by Seth's mother as p'r'aps I 'd orter done. Leastways, that 's the way it looks, now she 's dead. But when she was alive she said I was a lot! There! She 's took 'most every drop. She 's sleepy, too. Hushaby, hushaby, baby. Scat, you two! She 's goin' ter sleep! Oh, ain't it sweet! You mean ter say this dear little thin' ain't got any name yet? W'y, I 've seventeen names all picked out fer a little daughter!"

"She 'd be quite a royal personage if you gave them all to her. — Striking twelve ! " said the Elder, looking round for his greatcoat, getting into it quickly, and tying up his throat in the long yards of a woolen muffler. "I think I 'll leave her here overnight, anyway, if you don't mind the trouble — "

"Trouble ! "

"It 's really too cold to take a tender baby farther to-day. My wife gave me a bundle of clothes for her ; they 're in the pung. I 'll fetch them."

"Don't let in any more of a draught than you can help, Elder," said Kitty, holding up her apron. "My ! How that door slammed ! I sh'd 'a' thought 't would 'a' waked her up. But, Lor' ! I s'pose Gran'sir's fiddle 'll du that, anyway ! "

The Elder was taking off his boots that evening by the fire of the room that served for his study and his wife's sitting-room. "I think, my dear," he said to Mrs. Perry, who was turning his old coat, "that, considering I 'm a man, I arranged the affair of that baby pretty well."

"I 've heard say those laugh best who laugh last," said Mrs. Perry, her mouth full of pins. "But I suppose you 'll have to go up there again when it clears off — "

"And deal with Seth. And Seth 's another proposition. Yes."

Seth had been all day in the woods at his logging. As he straightened his back and wiggled into his

sweater, and sat on the icy stump eating his apple-pie at noon, the pie so cold that it made his teeth ache, he stretched the tired muscles of his arms and looked at the depth of the forest yet to go down under his axe; he asked himself what he was doing it for.

"It's all one long endurin' grind. Same old story year in an' year out. Green peas, Fourth of July, shell-beans, an' bank yer house. The's nobody ter come after me. Gran'sir 'll be dead, an' Kitty 'll be dead, an' I 'll be dead. Ef 't warn't fer that fiddle o' Gran'sir's I do' know 's I 'd heave another stroke. Gosh! that feelin' 's jes' the fiddle in my blood, an' work 's the on'y cure for it!" And he used the cure vigorously till the early nightfall, when he tramped home through the falling snow and the gale that struck him like a blow as he left the shelter of the wood.

Kitty had laid the baby down, and had heaped the frozen clothes in the lean-to, lest their dampness should hurt the child. And then she had picked the dead leaves of her scarlet geraniums in the window, feeling they must not suffer because of the baby. When she came back, Gran'sir was standing over the child with his fiddle, playing softly, softly, as he leaned down, "My love is but a lassie yet;" and the baby, warm and fed and in a state of well-being, was crowing and kicking in reply. It was almost the first time that Kitty had liked the sound of those strings. She ran and bent down too.

"She 's reel fond o' music, ain't she, Gran'sir?" she said, looking up at him with moist eyes.

"She 's sweet as a peach," said Gran'sir. And his fiddle twanged out a reel, and they persuaded themselves that the child's feet were keeping time to it. Then there was a great stamping off of snow in the shed, the door opened, and Seth came in. With a sudden sentiment both of protection and of defiance she caught the baby up and faced him.

"Whose baby is that?" he said.

"Mine!" she answered, triumphantly. And she held it high, dancing it up and down to the tune that still went on.

"Are you all out o' your heads?" cried Seth.

"Oh, Seth," she said, as the tune stopped, going to him with the child, "it 's a little baby that 's got no home an' no father nor mother. Can't we keep it, Seth?"

"We! We can't keep ourselves!" said Seth.

"As ef a baby 'd make any diff'runce!"

"'T would n't allus be a baby. Well, it 's blust'rin' up consider'ble. W'at you got fer supper?"

"But, Seth —"

"George! The table ain't sot out yit. And I 'm ready fer a square meal. Who 's visitin' 'ith that baby?"

"Nobody," she said, smiling at him over the child as he had not seen her smile in a year. "Elder Perry 's fetched the baby fer us ter take."

"Fer us ter take? — Where 's the sand? I got ter git this pitch off'n my hands. Come, Kitty, quit your foolin' an' let 's have some supper. I done a good day's work to-day."

"You 'd du a better one ef you hed this little thin' ter work fer," she said, in a tone that was new to him.

"You ain't in 'arnest, be ye, Kitty?" he exclaimed, wheeling round from the sink.

"I be, too! I wanter keep this baby!"

"Keep a child ye don't know nothin' about? W'y, you 're crazy, wife! A little come-by-chance ter break our hearts bime-by, maybe, 'ith the tricks of its own folks —"

"Its own folks was the Deacon Hills's. And I guess there ain't any better in the Settlement!"

"Sho, sho! An' there ain't any on 'em left. W'at 's goin' ter be done 'ith it?"

"It 's goin' ter stay here an' be ourn."

"Not ef I know it," said Seth. "Here, I 'll hold it while you git supper. How come the Elder ter fetch it here?"

"He was takin' it ter the poor'us," said Kitty, sullenly.

"He 'd better have gone on. It 's got ter go."

"In this snow? Not onlest I go tew!"

"Kitty! I would n't know 't was you!"

"Don't you Kitty me!" she cried, now in a storm of anger. "My name 's Keturah. And I won't be called out'n it!"

"But, Kitty — I mean, Keturah — I — "

"Oh, you, you, you!" And Kitty burst into tears and buried her face in the baby's skirts, the baby regarding it as play and clutching at her hair rejoicingly.

Seth loosened the tiny hands and took the child. "Kitty," he said, "you know I 'd du anythin' in reason. Ef the Lord had 'a' sent this, we 'd 'a' roughed it. But ter go and ask fer trouble by takin' it w'en we ain't a dollar ahead in the world, w'y, I can't! Ye might as well cry fer a pianner. I 'd like ter keep the little thin', — I would, sure. But it 's a luxury. An' we 're too poor for luxuries. I 'm sorry."

Gran'sir went to put his fiddle on the shelf, and touched Kitty's elbow as he went. The touch thrilled her with the knowledge that she had an ally. " 'T ain't settled yet," he whispered. " You git supper! "

"Kitty," said Seth, when they had finished and cleared away the repast, the baby fallen asleep, and had spread the red cloth on the table, and brought out the *Weekly Ploughman*, and turned up the lamp, "I don't want you ter think I don't reco'nize that you made dip-toast fer me to-night becos it 's a favoright 'ith me, an' give me your best preserves. I 'd keep the child 'thouten yer doin' that ef I felt anywise ekil to it. An' you need n't s'pose it ain't pleasant ter me ter see ye a-spreadin' of the little thin's ter warm, an' goin' roun' 'ith a baby on yer

arm. Fer it is. But that 's all there is about it." He rose and stretched his arms over his head. "Wal, I 'm tired as a dog thet 's run fer his life," he said, "and I guess I 'll go ter bed."

Gran'sir had already gone. Perhaps he thought it wise to leave the two. But he said he would take his fiddle and hear it answer the storm, after a way he had of laying it on the other pillow, against his ear, while its half-guessed murmurings filled him with a sort of rapture, as if he listened to a voice long silent, or Nature were whispering to him under her breath what others never heard.

The wind had risen at dusk, and the storm pressed against the house like a giant shoulder, every now and then sending a shudder against its last timber. Kitty had always an unexplained terror of storm by night. The invisible force moving mightily through the dark seemed some supernatural enemy. She wanted then the shelter of Seth's courage, and to lie close, close, her face hid in his sleeve. It added to her sense of injury that to-night they could not be friendly. She leaned her forehead against the cold window-pane and saw the snowflakes drift by the lane of light like sparks of fire, with a feeling of being out in all the bitterness of the blast.

"I 'm glad I ain't fond of her yit — not so very much," she murmured. "I s'pose I got ter give in." The snow-laden gusts made her tremble with a redoubled sense of her impotence. "To send the little

thin' out alone!" she sobbed. "Wal, I got ter give in." She warmed the baby's milk again, and laid her back in the clothes-basket, and shut the kittens down-cellar, and sealed the mouse-crack with a piece of soap, and put out the light. A moon was rising behind the storm, and with her last look a great white ghost outside seemed to be moving on and on, forever on. "O Lord in heaven," she whispered, "if I can't have her, give her good care somewheres else! But, oh, I du want her, I du want her so!" Only a long rush of the wind replied. And then she cried herself to sleep, partly with temper, and partly with her hurt. "I got ter give in," was her last thought over and over. "The woman allus has ter go to the wall."

When Seth came out in the morning, the baby lying there with wide-open eyes, sucking her little fist, held out her arms joyously as he struck a light. He stealthily covered her up, for the little fists were blue. All day long those eyes haunted him with their appeal. The storm still roared on, whirling and white. The Elder would not come up for the baby, nor could Seth himself go to the woods. He tunneled a way to the barn, fed and milked the cows, and busied himself splitting kindlings and with the odd jobs waiting for such a day. And every time he came into the kitchen he saw his wife going about her work with that baby on her arm, or rocking it to sleep in the low chair, with an expression on her

face that would have been seraphic if it had not been one of such injury; or standing over the clothes-basket which she and Gran'sir had lifted to the table, and talking all sorts of sweet nonsense to the cooing little creature in it. "It 's the onluckiest storm 't ever was," he muttered. "Ef it don't hold up, she 'll be gittin' ter keer fer that child so I 'll have to give in." Once he looked into the basket himself, a little gingerly, on tiptoe. "I *wisht* we could keep it," he said. And his wife flung herself down in the next chair and flung her apron over her head.

Two or three times Gran'sir took the baby and rocked her, his fiddle strangely silent all day. Or he carried her to the window, looking out at the wild white tempest. "Don't you be afeard on it," he said. "It 's the best friend you got."

The tension in the house reached Seth's nerves. It would be easier to do in anger what was to be done. But he had never been very angry in his life. The corned beef and cabbage were boiled to perfection at noon-time, and there was a blueberry duff, made with the fruit Kitty had picked and canned last summer; and there were toasted herring, and potatoes bursting their skins in the oven, and brewis and cider-apple sauce for supper. These things must not move him. It was not possible to feed another mouth, to clothe another back. And this was the time to find who was master in the house. He could n't have been more silent if his lips were padlocked.

For three days the storm raged, wet, wild, and dreary; and then a white world and crisp cold, and sunshine and blue sky, as if there had never been anything else. The townsfolk were out breaking the road with the big, slow teams; and the Elder came bustling up in his pung, and being met by Gran'sir at the end door, after a few moments of expostulatory talk on his part, drove off as he had come. Seth returned from shoveling a way to the well through the sparkling drifts, glowing from his work, and glad the affair was finished.

"So the Elder come for the baby," he said.

"He did n't git her," Gran'sir replied. And he lifted the child from the blankets.

"Did n't — git — her — "

"Did n't git her. She 's goin' ter stay here. She 's goin' ter take my place here. *I'm* goin' ter the poor-'us. I kin play my fiddle jes' 's well in one place as another, an' I 'm goin' ter the poor'us an' let her stay where — where she 'll do the mos' good."

Seth ran his hands through his wet curls in bewilderment. The world was coming to an end. A McGregor — the poorhouse —

"Oh, come now, Gran'sir, talk sense!" he said, waking.

"I 'm talkin' sense — horse-sense. I 'm talkin' jes' w'at I mean," said the old man, erect and severe. "I 'm goin' ter make over ter the town w'at the United States pays me fer my service ter the war.

I 've thinked it all out — and I guess I 'll be treated with consideration there, an' I 'll hev my fiddle — "

"Gran'sir! I sh'd think you was meanin' it!"

"I be, sir."

"You can't be! It 's agin' reason! It 's agin' natur'!"

"I be. Dead sure. I could 'a' ast the Elder ter set me over, but my Sunday shirt was to the wash, an' Kitty ain't got it ironed yit, and I ain't put my thin's tergether. My days is nigh a'most over, an' this 'ere young un's is jes' begun. The poor'us don't hurt me, — but ef it don't kill her it 'll be the ruination of her. I 'm sorry to leave ye — durned sorry — "

"Gran'sir! Gran'sir! Oh, you never would!" cried Kitty, the color fled from her cheeks, steadying herself by the back of the chair as she stood.

"We can't hear to this, Gran'sir! We can't hear to this blamed folly!" said Seth. "Go away an' leave us? Go there? After all these years? W'y, ye could n't du it, Gran'sir!" And his voice was shaking. "An', fer the matter o' that," he said, as soon as he could speak again, "we should n't keep this 'ere young un ef you did go. You 're wuth — wuth — forty young uns! This baby 's goin' where she belongs, anyways."

"Then there 's all the more cause fer me ter go tew. I 'll go ter take keer on her. I ain't so old or dodderin' yit that I hev ter hev a gardeen or can't du w'at I 'm a mind ter. And ef the little creetur 's

goin' ter the poor'us, w'y, I 'm goin' tew, fer ter take keer on her. I 'm takin' this 'ere little orphin fer my darter. An' her name 's McGregor. An' my child can't go ter the poor'us and I stay to hum," said Gran'sir. "An' there it is."

Seth stared at the old man a moment, and then at his wife, his face scarlet, his voice gone. "That settles it, I s'pose," at last he said. "Naterally you don't go. I give in. Kitty!" he cried, "was you knowin' ter this?"

"Oh, I could n't 'a' dreamed it," she answered, white and trembling. "Oh no, no, no! But ef the baby 's boun' ter stay, I — I can't help it — I 'm — I'm glad, I 'm glad, I 'm glad!"

"I bet you be!"

"I meant it, tew; I vum I did!" said Gran'sir, as he turned away. Presently he came back. "Ef you want the child," he said, with a magnanimous air, "she 's yours, o' course."

"Oh, I du, I du!" cried Kitty.

Seth looked at them a minute longer. "Wal, I 'll take a bite o' pie an' some cold meat, an' be off ter the woods," he said.

"W'at time 'll you be back?" she asked, wondering a little at his manner.

"I do' know 's I 'll ever come back," he said.

She ran and snatched the baby from Gran'sir and held her up in the broad sunbeam that made a glory about her in the brown shadows of the old room.

"Oh, Seth!" she cried. "It's ourn! It's ourn! You ain't sorry, be you?"

The radiant little creature springing in her arms, all unconscious of the turning of fate, held out both hands to him and screamed as if with pleasure at his ruddy face, his blazing blue eyes, his red curls.

"Take it, Seth. Oh, Seth, du take her! It's our little gal!" And she held it so close to him that he had to put his arm out. The baby reached forward and grasped his hair, and wiped a little wet mouth over his face, and something unawares made him tighten his arm and hold her close to his heart.

"Kitty," he said, "there's allus trouble in a house w'en a baby comes. I guess it's over now. She's got here all right. W'at you wanter call her!"

"Amanda Seraphina!" exclaimed Kitty, rapturously. "I mind Elder sayin' wunst thet 'Mandy meant 'she must be loved.' An' Seraphina's jest a little angel!"

"Sho! I shan't hev her called no sech outlandish names. Too sweet ter be hullsome. She's Keturah. That's the best name there is. I shan't hev her called out of it!" he said, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Seth," his wife said, timidly, "you ain't bearin' Gran'sir no hard feelin's?"

"'T was ruther rough, warn't it? — the way he tuk. But I guess the' warn't no other. Fact is, I wanted her all the time, Kitty."

"You 're twicet as good 's I be!" And as she could n't get at her apron, she wiped her eyes with his hand. "Come to mother, darlin'!" she said, shyly, with a quick look at him. But the baby turned and hid her little head in Seth's neck, and his conquest was complete.

An ecstatic afternoon was Kitty's, lining the big basket, Seth helping, all other work forgotten, and even this suspended once in a while for five minutes' play with the new treasure, or with running to take from her remorseless grasp one of the kittens, while Gran'sir gave her the other. But by nightfall things were more quiet. Kitty sat then by the fire, holding the baby across her knee and rubbing the pretty bare back and active legs.

"I never thought I 'd come ter sayin' a good word fer a fiddle," she was thinking. "But ef Gran'sir 'd 'a' b'en the other sort he would n't 'a' put himself about so ter keep this baby. He would n't 'a' felt fer the little thin' sent out in the cold, alone in the world — oh, precious one, you allus got me, you allus got father an' me! He would n't 'a' knowed w'at I felt. I do' know but w'at maybe there 's a power o' sympathy in a fiddle. P'r'aps it takes you inter folks' hearts. P'r'aps there 's jes' 's many fiddles in heaven as there be harps. An' Gran'sir 'll be all ready." She put on the baby's nightclothes, and fed it, and sat gently rocking, ineffably contented. "Gran'sir," she said, "I was thinkin' you could be

a lot of help ef you took to it. I would n't wonder but you could play this child to sleep nights."

"I would n't wonder," said Gran'sir.

"You said you 'd keep the new fiddle, the Cap'n's fiddle, fer a fit occasion. Don't ye think this is an occasion — the little gal 's gittin' a home, less'n our gittin' the blessin' of her? "

Gran'sir had tuned the violin, and the baby was gurgling with delight as she listened to the stirring tones of "Rob Roy McGregor, oh," when a sound of bell-ringing came far and faint up the valley.

"I guess there 's a fire," said Seth, stepping out to see.

"Or else it 's ringin' fer evenin' meetin'," said Kitty. "But 't ain't Wednesday."

"It 's Chris'mus eve," said Gran'sir.

"And I 'd forgot! "

There was a moment's silence.

"Oh, Gran'sir," said Kitty then, "what a present you 've give me! My own little daughter! The dear! Where do you s'pose her soul was afore it come here? A little child does bring ye close to the givin' o' God, don't it, now? This is the night that Christ was born, baby, and it 's the night that you was born fer me."

"Christ is born into every house," said Gran'sir, "w'en a little child is born there."

The violin began again a silver strain; the child sighed itself off to sleep with a cooing sound like

song. Seth came in and bent over the basket with Kitty. It was full of wonder and a sweet awe, this new life that had come to them.

They lifted the basket between them, the husband and wife, and went to their bedroom, whose door had hours ago been set open, and Gran'sir put out the light. And long between waking and sleeping the mother heard, as if it breathed out of Paradise, the murmur of the violin, while the old man, watched by the bright eyes of the little mouse, who had burrowed a way through his crack again, sat in the kitchen, where the moon, shining on the white world outside, threw a mysterious glow, and bending his head lovingly over his strings, he played softly the old, old air:

"Sing, holy night and happy morn,
For unto us a child is born;
The Prince of Peace, O blessed birth,
Has come to make a heaven of earth!"

THE BLESSING CALLED PEACE

VIII

The Blessing Called Peace

ELDER PERRY was very unhappy. He had a quarrel with the Lord. And to be wroth with one we love doth work like madness in the brain, we are told. All his life, he said, he had loved the Lord; he had served and honored Him, had had high joy in communion with Him. And the Lord had forsaken him. He had implored the life of Davy — the Lord had not listened. The laughing, lovely little creature had gone over into the dark unknown — oh, like a white butterfly fluttering in the night!

The night? The dark unknown? The Elder knew there should be nothing dark in it to him, filled as it was with the divine personality. But robbed of his child — so flagrant a violation of love — although he went on with his duties, he felt that he was living a lie.

Loss of Davy made the undercurrent of his life. It was the child's starlike eyes that he saw in the stars of the midnight blue; the petals of a rose wore the velvet of the child's cheek; music brought back the lilting tones; the stir of the poplar leaves gave him, with a sort of agony, the patter of little feet. Two tiny shoes tore his heart like the trampling of wild horses. Scraps of paper fell from his sermon

book where the boy had drawn a rude head with something that meant wings, as if playing with foreknowledge of companions he was soon to have. When the first snow fell, it was only a compulsion of decency that hindered the Elder from lying down beside the little mound and shielding it with his arms. Did not his wife remember when once he spoke irritably and the child came, with his little lip trembling, and held up his arms imploringly, his blue eyes full of tears, as if begging to be forgiven for what he had not done? Could she not see him when looking up at the sky in an ecstasy as if it were only a film between him and God? It cut him to the quick that the child should be wronged of his sweet rights. Life, his life, had been given to him, and now its bright days, its struggles and victories and joys, were wrested away.

Perhaps it would have been less bitter if Davy had not died just when he was to walk in the procession of children singing "March on, Christian Soldiers." There should be no more festivals in his little meeting-house while the stars wheeled in the sky!

It was a weary winter. The spring brought him no sense of the upspringing of sod to a higher life in grass and flower. The orchards that once made the earth seem winged gave him no rapture; he saw no loveliness in the slim white birch shaking her green gauzes about her. The summer, that had seemed the

visible expression of God alive in his world, was only the untended flame of a forsaken altar.

One evening, Miss Mahala — who, as you know, often played the part of colleague in plain clothes — having stayed to tea, was telling of a young robin that fell from the nest last spring, Puss Pharaoh looking on, his green eyes big as blazes; and when she picked it up for its safety the parent robins had flown at her as if she were ruining their nest. It was the last straw. The exasperated Elder, quick at application, uttered a terrible word, and stalked from the room.

"Ain't that awful!" whispered Miss Mahala, breathlessly. "Mis' Perry," she added, bending over solemnly, "this goes no furder. Never — Sort of a useless word, anyways. The poor man warn't never learned to swear. You have a hard time on't, dear soul. But I guess the worm suffers some gittin' its wings."

Of course all this distressed the Elder's wife. She felt that he did not deserve to be told of the Angel of Blessing hovering over the house. At any rate, the right moment did not come for telling him. But she was a loving person. "Dear," she said, "you are not well. You must rest awhile. Drop everything and go to your mother. She always helps you." And, after some murmuring, the Elder went.

His mother's house was forty miles beyond the mountains. The roundabout stage-coach did not suit

his mood; he would go afoot. Once his knapsack and stick would have meant scrip and staff. They did not now. All was matter-of-fact. He would spend the night at Giles Gonne's cabin, and proceed next day.

The woods were ripe with color, but the Elder was blind to their glory. A high-bush blueberry, before which he would have felt as if it were the burning bush itself, was no more that day than any wayside weed. He plodded on wearily, something spent when he reached Giles Gonne's cabin, on a shelf of rock where the road wound below with a seldom wayfarer.

Giles lay on a tumultuous bed, with a burning fever. "Come in, whoever you be, an' gimme a drink o' water!" was his greeting.

"Why, Giles, you sick?" said the Elder.

"Dog-gone sick," replied the thick voice. "That you, sir? Come up 'cause I was sick? Then fetch some cold water, for God's sake!"

The Elder brought water from the spring and was presently bathing the man, smoothing the bed, and looking over his kit for the medicines that he always carried on his ministrations. "Reg'lar doctor," said Giles, feebly, "body and soul. Hev ter be. Good on ye. I do' know 's ye know I took the dipthery to your Davy. No?"

The Elder stood still with horror.

"Gilly — now, Gilly, daddy's boy — be still,"

the delirium remounting. "Daddy 'll go down to Salt Water for the doctor's stuff. No medicine here, ye know. No nothin' here! Lock 's kind o' rusty. Guess I 'll look back an' see if he 's stirrin'. No — he don't sense nothin'. Poor Gilly — never did sense thin's. Oh, gimme some water, some col' tea, quick, I 'm burnin' up alive! So was Gilly, poor lamb! Wal, wal," he said presently, tossing off the clothes, "it 's a footsore way. I 'm pretty well torn up, Mis' Perry, a-tumblin' an' a-stumblin' in bush an' brier," he cried, after a moment, falling back. "Oh, that 'll be good, ma'am, ef ye can spare it. I won't hev to go on, then. It 's a stretch to Salt Water, even ef I got a lift. An' time 's money. Time 's life an' death! That your boy? Davy his name? Come here, little lad, let me heft ye. Light 's a feather. Gimme a kiss for Gilly and I 'll let ye go. Got the face of an angel. Says his prayers? Tell him to pray fer Gilly — oh, poor Gilly! Blame these briers! There 's that log acrost the way ag'in! That 's a nasty fall — ain't broke nothin', hev I? Make haste, oh, make haste! There 's the door — where 's the key? Oh, yes, here. Gilly! Gee, but it 's dark! Gilly! Oh, my God, Gilly 's dead!" And then came brief stupor.

So that was the way the infection came to Davy? This man's action had killed his boy. But it was hardly a conscious thought. No idea of good to them that despitefully use you followed. The Elder sprang

to the help of one who needed him. As soon as he had cooled the fever ever so slightly he milked the cow and gathered the eggs, had Giles drink the warm milk, and made his own supper ready. Then he sponged off the patient again and prepared for the night.

There were three nights without sleep, except for a nap caught standing — terrible nights, with raving and profanity that made the Elder's heart stop beating. "I never knew you swore, Giles," he said, in spite of himself.

"Did n't ye?" said Giles. "Then you hear me now." And the Elder's blood ran cold.

"Where 's your wife, Giles?" he asked in a lucid moment.

"I know where she 'd orter be," cried Giles. "Buyin' ribbons fer a dance, an' Gilly sick then!"

"But she has been home since?"

"Off an' on she ain't." And after a moment, "Gol darn her, she knowed I can't read writin'!" And the air became so blue the Elder had to go out for a breath of the blowing north wind.

The raving went on, shrill and incoherent, growing faint, till at last came deep sleep. And then the Elder was on his knees praying with all his might for Giles's salvation.

Giles slept through the night and late the next day. The fever was gone, his strength gone too. "Elder," he whispered faintly, as the Elder went

to give him nourishment, "do idiot boys have souls?"

"Of course they do. That is—" began the surprised Elder.

"Wal, if Gilly had a soul, he 's somewheres where I must go an' take care on him. They won't separate him an' me, Elder?" looking up with piteous, wan eyes.

"They can't," said the Elder. "What belongs to you, you will have." And then a sudden inner light flashed blindingly upon the Elder.

"I heern ye prayin' fer my soul. So I guess I 'm safe to go fer Gilly. I 'd like — ter see Gilly with his soul showin'."

And that was all. The Elder labored with stimulants, and whey, and many a wrestling prayer. But Giles slipped out of life as if the tide down at the great river mouth ebbing out to sea drew the soul with it.

With his capable hands the Elder did what was necessary. Then he read "The Lord is my Shepherd," if perfunctorily, and sang his customary psalm, and offered his petition, and trod down the sod. And he packed his small kit again and was ready to be off.

It was just then that a peddler's cart came along below and left a woman whom he recognized as Mrs. Gonne, who, loaded with boxes, climbed the path and went into the house. She came out again presently.

"Where's Mr. Gonne?" she demanded.

The Elder pointed at the resting-place.

"Oh, my goodness! Both on 'em!" she cried. "An' me here all alone! An' I gotter to go an' buy black! Hev you smoked out?" she asked suddenly. "You need n't to look at me that way. I went off so 's not to ketch it, and it 'd be redic'lous ef I come back an' ketched it, arter all!"

"You would deserve it," said the Elder.

"I 'd like ter know who you be ter talk so to a widder that 's jes' laid away her only husband an' her child!" she declared. "Ef you ever lost — you 'd orter sense how I 'm feelin' ef you ever buried a boy!"

To compare that idiot boy and his own heavenly child! The Elder's wrath ran high. "Woman!" he roared, but stopped, remembering that Gilly, free among the dead, might now be all that Davy was.

"You need n't 'woman' me!" exclaimed Mrs. Gonne. "I 'm no more woman 'n other folks be! Oh, that empty cheer! Oh!" she said, looking up with her pale, wide-open eyes. "It brings you dretfle near the black outside. I 'm scairt mos' to death! Oh, say — I know I done wrong. But there 's wuss an' wiser folks 'n me. I was made kind o' light. P'r'aps we ain't all born with souls. Giles said his'n come to him; it come with a buzz. P'r'aps I hed n't no soul ter give Gilly. He looked at me reproachful like till I hatter skip. I ain't took thin's in yet. But

don't you leave me here! Jes' think o' me here awake in the dark night. I 'd go deestracted. Say, do you b'lieve in hell?"

"Hell," said the Elder, feeling as if he had met the Scarlet Lady in person, "hell is absence from God."

She stared at him a moment. "Then I 've been there all my life!" she said. And in the instant the Elder felt that since Davy's death he had been there, too.

Directly afterward he forgot himself — here was work for him. "I 'm going on down to my mother's," he said. "Mrs. Perry, in the Byways. If you like, you can come with me."

"Mis' Perry. I 'm knowin' to her. Her speckle hen laid away oncet, an' Mis' Perry would n't shet her in, cause the hen 'd be feelin' bad about the eggs out there. Be you her son? Be you Elder Perry? I heern tell on ye. No, no," she said, retreating, "I guess I 'd ruther stay here."

"You will come with me," said the Elder. "God forgive me for doubting it, but, if you have n't a soul, my mother will put one into you."

"I — I do' know ef I want one."

"I do," said the Elder. "Come. I am in the habit of being obeyed," he added, sternly.

She went into the house, and, opening one of her boxes, took from a hat a bunch of impossible roses, went over and divided them between the two mounds,

securing them with some stones; and then, having made a small parcel, as if she must not break the Elder's habit of being obeyed, she followed him down.

It was noon of the last November day, the air full of lingering Indian summer balsams, hoar-frosts overlying the hollows, and purple hazes hanging round the hills. To the Elder, lost in thought, the beauty passed like a phantom. They stopped at a racing brook to drink from the Elder's folding cup. "Lord! Elder," said Mrs. Gonne, "ain't you got nothin' stronger 'n that?"

In days before his quarrel this traversing of woodland ways would have been the Elder's joy. He would have seen the heavenly hand in every bud pushing off the dead leaf. In every withering tassel of barberries he would have seen provision for the birds; with every bank of drifting mist reaching the sun and smitten with white glory he would have sung, "The clouds in heaven praise Thee!" But here he was blind to beauty, robbed of his old happiness, walking in company with what seemed the sin of the world incarnate.

As they neared the village a dog ran out; he was caught by his master. "The old feller flies out at ye every time he sees ye," said the man.

"I hurt him once without meaning to. Yes, he flies out, but I forgive him," said the Elder, good-humoredly.

"The dog ain't forgive," said Mrs. Gonne.

Something smote the Elder like a lash. "Am I a dog that I should do this thing?" he would have cried.

The Elder's mother was as well versed in old ballads as in old hymns.

"I 've been in the wild-wood, mother; make my bed soon,
For I 'm sick at the heart and I fain would lie doun,"

she remembered, when her son asked to go to his old room. It had seemed to the Elder that not only every bone in his body ached, but his soul itself. "It 's only a little," she said.

"It 's the little things that count," said her son, bitterly. "An idiot boy, a dog!"

She sat down beside him, while Mrs. Gonne in the kitchen, having declared she would as soon sing hymns as love songs, — unwitting that she was to sing them there the rest of her life, — was singing the only one she knew, in a way to make the cat's back stand up straight. And then, after the old custom, the son told his mother all.

"Giles had done you a deadly wrong, you felt," said the mother. "Through him you lost your boy. Yet you tended him, you comforted him, you did not spare yourself. He was thirsty and you gave him drink, he was hungered and you fed him. Do you think God is less good than you?" And with other words, gentle and maybe wise, she brought him rest as since time began has been the way of mothers.

She used no more arguments. Perhaps she could not have done so, anyway. But Miss Mahala, some time before, had taken the stage-coach to visit an acquaintance, and had slipped over in her friend's chaise to see the Elder's mother, whom she knew. "So, you see," she said, having told her story, "that 't ain't no use a-firin' off argymence. It ain't wuth yer breath to be a-tellin' him the 'arth warn't good enough fer Davy, or that he 's the father of an angel. He 'd on'y want ter fly away inter some other climax an' be at rest from ye. Fact is, he 's got a quar'l with the Lord, an' he 's jes' like a clock that 's wound too tight. You gotter help him run down. He 's a prophet to the soul if there ever was one; but I s'pose prophets are made of dust, an' go back to it, and shed consid'able along the way. His wife was right —"

"She always is," said the mother.

"She said you 'd fix him up. I guess the Lord knowed what he was about w'en he made mothers. Elder was tellin' us an old story of somebuddy in a fight, an' every time he fell on mother-'arth he got fresh strength from her. Don't seem exac'ly even that Pharaoh should be all I — But I won't complain. Pharaoh's very companionable. Wal, I thought I 'd let ye know how the land laid. Snow 's held off late. Unfortun't' fer the grass. But natur' ushully makes thin's right in the long run."

Nature does — in her own time. The Elder had

thought that a couple of weeks in his old room under the eaves, where the snow filtered over his coverlet, of being a boy again, thinking no thoughts, feeling no cares, a couple of weeks of his mother's daily life and conversation, of the healing of her hand, would bring back all the fresher currents of life. But, being made of dust, as Miss Mahala said, he did not escape the effect of wind and weather on dust, the effect of his experience and exposure, and a raging illness came to burn the dross out of him, and its consequent weakness held him housed for many weeks. The Conference supplied his place for the time, as Miss Mahala asked them. But one night the Elder waked to see the day-star shining in the east like a risen spirit. "'Canst thou bind the sweet influences of the Pleiades?'" he said to himself. And when the light in his mother's eyes shone upon his face, "'I will not leave you comfortless; I will come to you,'" he said again.

The bells of the stage which brought the Elder back by the main road — the wild-wood way being still deep with the early April snow — rang all the time with the tune,

> "Traveler, lo, the Prince of Peace,
> Lo, the Son of God is come!"

They passed many lonely dwellings where happy children ran to the windows, or where they trimmed some little church with Easter lilies. He left the conveyance at the foot of the hill and went over to the

old burying-ground. The trees there, as he passed, shed over him showers of sifted silver. The great fir-tree swayed in the wind and stretched a dark and soft protecting bough across the low bed. The full paschal moon hung above, balanced on broad wings of light, like a brooding mother. But Davy was not there.

The Elder went up the hill. There were lights about the house, and a murmur of voices as he opened the door. Miss Mahala met him with a joyful outcry. "Would you take care of this?" he asked, handing her the pot of Easter lilies he had brought from his mother's.

"Cert'in," she said. "An' you'll find an Easter gift in there better 'n lilies or burnt off'rin's," she added, closing the door of his wife's room behind him.

That his wife should be in bed and ill was grievous; but his exaltation almost put that fact out of sight. His heart was too full even for the customary greetings. "Ellen," he whispered, bending over the pillow, "it is all over. I have no more quarrel with the Lord. It is Easter — the Lord has risen — He has risen in my heart. God has forgiven me."

"And have you forgiven God?" she sighed.

"I have given Him Davy," he said. "My soul and your soul."

"And your little daughter's soul, then," said his wife, drawing down an edge of flannel, and showing the tiny being asleep beside her.

The Elder fell on his knees, hiding his face in the bed. "His mercy endureth forever!" he half sobbed.

His wife lifted her hand and laid it on his head. "The child's name," she said, with an indescribable accent of joy in her tone, "the child's name is Peace."

FATHER JAMES

IX

Father James

THE broad shoulders were bent a little more that morning than toil had bent them, and the sun-browned, many-lined face wore an apprehensive look which troubled the kindly eyes regarding it.

"Ef I hed n't b'en so shore of her, mother, in the fust place," said the farmer, "I would n't ever have let her gone,"— biting at the grass straw in his hand.

"She 'd hev gone just the same," said his wife. "W'en a girl sets her mind on schoolin', she 's boun' ter have it, ef the angel with the flamin' sword stan's in the way."

"Wal, she 's got it."

"Yes; and ef it 's the right sort, you no need to trouble."

"But I can't feel jes' shore of her now."

"I feel jes' shore of her now."

"W'y, it stan's ter reason, mother —"

"That a good girl 'll look down on her own folks because she knows verbs and angles and languages an' they don't! I know Lally, at any rate, better 'n that. Now you go long back ter your mowin', afore the dew 's all off the grass. It 's the third time you 've b'en in about this notion," said his wife, rubbing the

crumbs of flour off her hands. "Ef we can't trust our own child, the world can't come to an end too soon!"

"That's jes' w'at I 'm thinkin'," he said. "An' I don't want it to come to an end. It 's b'en a pleasant world; an' the thought of her comin' home has b'en the pleasantest part of it — I mean, of course, the pleasantest sence them old days w'en I merried you! But I 've b'en doin' a sight of thinkin' lately — an' w'en a girl 's b'en gone all these years, an' b'en amongst the folks thet knows everythin', an' comes back home to the folks thet don't know much of anythin' — "

"They 're her folks, though. An' blood 's thicker 'n water. An' she's Lally."

"Yes, she 's Lally. But I — but you — I 've tried, mother, — I 've spelt over them books she 's sent home; but I can't make nothin' out'n 'em. My spettacles don't noways fit my eyes — "

"Now, father! It ain't likely but Lally 's seen enough of the folks that can read them books. She don't love us because we can read books or can't read 'em. She loves us because we 're ourselves. I would n't own her if she did n't!"

"That 's jest it. You 'll be gittin' put out 'ith her, an' there 'll be trouble — "

"Now, Sam, you go right back to the mowin'-field! I gotter git my work done. I jes' sent down some molasses an' ginger water, an' it 'll be all warm

— and I sent some apple patties, too, an' you won't git your share — and, anyway, you go along!"

Her husband dispiritedly pulled himself together. "I can't say as I git much encouragement from you," he said.

"Encouragement for what?" she asked. "For doubtin' your own child? That ain't what ye want." And she laid her floury hand on his shoulder. "Sam," she said, "we've allus got each other."

"It ain't enough," he said, with something like a sob. "It ain't enough without her."

"Well, I guess that's right," said his wife.

"Emerline, I don't mean" — turning about again — "I —"

"Oh, I know what you mean! Now if you don't make tracks that timothy 'll be the thickness of rushes!" And he went out slowly, his shoulders stooped as if carrying a load.

His wife sat down and cried a little then. If you know why, it is more than she did. And then she bustled about till old Fuzz found his safe refuge under the stove, and the pantry shelves bent with the weight of pies and crullers and pound-cakes and the cold roast lamb. The men had had their dinner in the mowing-field; and when her husband came home, she was sitting, pale but placid, in her lilac calico, her gray hair smooth as satin, her foot in the stirrup of her cabbage-netting, and Fuzz purring on the window-sill beside her.

"Ain't ye goin' ter dress up, Emerline?" he asked, querulously.

"What for?" she said, calmly.

"You got a black silk," he said, as if challenging her to deny it, "and a gold chain —"

"I 'd look pretty gittin' supper in a silk gownd and a gold chain!"

"You look pretty anyway, Emerline. But w'en we 're expectin' company —"

"My daughter ain't company."

"But I wanted to put on my Sunday coat —"

"Do you s'pose Lally thinks of us in our Sunday clo'es, or jes' 's we be?"

"But she 's b'en seein' folks in better 'n our best."

"You go an' wash, father, an' put on a clean shirt, an' slick your hair —"

"W'y, I 've b'en 'lottin' all day on gittin' into my other thin's, Emerline. I shaved this mornin' a-puppus."

"You ain't much time ter lose, then. I 'll be a-settin' the table."

When her husband came back, fresh and rosy with the soap and water and the clean shirt, his coat hanging over his arm, he sat down by the stove dejectedly, while she bustled about, opening the oven door lest the biscuit browned too soon, lifting the griddles to moderate the heat, bringing the lamb and the mint sauce from the pantry, pouring the boiling water off

the potatoes and setting them back that they might burst their skins.

"It 's dretfle waitin' so," said her husband. And he stretched his arm and took down the accordion from the shelf above — the mother-of-pearl keys always seeming to him things of beauty and part of the melody — and began playing a plaintive air. Presently he paused. "You know, Emerline," he said, "there was Harding's Aba that come home too high an' mighty fer her folks."

"Lally is n't a Harding."

"No, Lally is n't a Harding," he repeated, as if that were some comfort, and fell to playing softly again. "No, Lally 's Lally," he said, pausing again.

"I 'm sure I hope so!" cried a gay voice behind him; and two hands were laid upon his eyes. "I give you three guesses who it is, Father James! And the forfeit 's kisses!"

"It 's my girl! It 's my girl!" he cried, upsetting his chair as he sprang to his feet and caught her to himself, the accordion falling forgotten. And the girl, a tall young birch-tree of a girl, could n't speak for the tears that were half laughing and half crying.

"Oh, I 'm so glad to be here again!" she said then, as she broke away from him and ran to her mother. "Oh, mother, everything 's just the same! I don't know how many nights I 've dreamed about it! Oh, if it had n't been for the dreams of those nights, I don't know how I could have stayed away!"

"And it 's the same little girl, Emerline! Don't you see? You can't grow thorns on an apple-tree!"

"It 's the same dear people! Oh, I 'm so glad you 're my people!" And she threw off her hat and jacket, and had an arm round each of them again.

"We ain't the sort of people you 've b'en goin' with, Lally," said her father, with a slight relapse into doubt.

"You 're a thousand times better! There 's nobody like you!" And she kissed the tear off his face. "Oh, here 's dear old Fuzz! He remembers me — I really think he does — after all these years! And the old clock 's ticking just the same! Wait till I run up to my room, and I 'll help you get tea, mother."

"I set some white laylocks there," said her father, when she was gone. "I thought 't would make it seem brighter like. She 's b'en havin' thin's nice." And then he added, anxiously, "You don't s'pose she 's puttin' anythin' on, do you, mother?"

"Mr. James, you do beat all! Goin' about lookin' for trouble. Can you see that face an' think she 's makin' b'lieve? Puttin' thin's on! Now we 'll dish up 'fore she 's back — she 's gotter explore every corner of the garret fust — and I 'll blow the horn jes' 's I useter w'en she was down to the medder lot. We 've got our child back, father!"

"Wal, p'r'aps we hev. I guess we hev. You do

find a way of makin' thin's comfortable, mother. I s'pose I 'd better put my coat on 'fore we set? "

"Why not? "

"It 's dretfle warm."

"She 's b'en useter coats an' all that, you was sayin' ? "

"Yes. An' I guess she 'd feel it wuss 'n I do. Emerline, you 've got a collar on! "

"I do' know where your eyes be, Mr. James. Ever sence you came home from the war with your bounty-money an' back-pay, an' we hed the house painted an' the front-door porch built on, I 've hed a collar w'en I fixed up after the day's work."

"I s'pose you could n't churn an' bake in one? I do' know how I can cut that line o' lamb 'ith these sleeves a-pullin' — "

"It don't need much cuttin'. It 's tender 's a snow-apple."

"I do' know," with a sigh. "I do' know. By gracious! " he cried suddenly, glancing through the open door, "there 's that young shorthorn in the new corn again! Does seem as if everythin' come to once, an' w'en you least expect it most! " And the sight acting like a quick pick-me-up, he was after the shorthorn, a pair of swift feet pattering behind him, and he came back from a triumphant rescue of the corn with Lally on his arm, quite another man.

"Why, father," said Lally, as they sat down at the table, "what have you got that thick coat on

for, in this weather? You take it right off, and mother and I 'll make you a linen one instead. You 've got a dickey on, too! It 's just because I was coming! But it 's mighty becoming." An order from the Governor would n't have hindered Mr. James from wearing the becoming article next morning. "I should think I was a queen, to see you!" she said. "Did you put on a dickey the day I was born?"

"The day you was born," said her father solemnly, and laying down his knife, "ef I 'd hed a dickey on 't would 'a' b'en like a piece o' wet paper — the way 't will be w'en I come in fum mowin' to-morrer."

"Father James! You would n't wear a dickey out mowing?"

"I do' know. Would n't ye?"

"Of course I would n't!"

"Wal, I don't s'pose the king wears his crown ter bed. Yes," after a moment's thought and the disappearance of a buttered biscuit, "the day you was born it was jes' the gray of the dawnin', an' a great star hung in the east — I guess a star hangs in the east before all blessings come — "

"You 're a blessing yourself, Father James!"

"Guess your mother don't think so," with a shy glance across the table.

"Sometimes I do, father. Sometimes," said the calm voice there.

"An' by the time they fetched ye inter the room where I was stan'in' by the winder the sky of a sudding flamed up the color of an evening-primrose, an' you wus a-starin' stret out 'ith them big eyes o' yourn, an' fust ye blinked an' then ye sneezed. I vum, the bobolink's whistle down in the medder lot never made half so sweet a sound as thet little sneeze. But somehow it skeered me, too. You warn't nothin' but a mite, a handful o' live dust; but there was suthin' sort o' awesome in that handful. You wus n't there a minute ago, and now you wus, an' the thin's that make life an' death wus there, too. I tell ye, I was limp. 'Sam,' sez your mother, w'en I see her, 'it 's a 'mortal sperrit.' An' I did n't darst kiss ye."

"You do now, don't you?" the 'mortal spirit cried, and she sprang up and darted round to hug him. "Did I choke you with these arms, Father James?" she said, as he emerged red from the embrace.

"They 're dear arms," said Father James.

"They 're strong ones. That 's what gymnasium, and basket-ball, and rowing, and lifting deadweights of women at the hospital do for you. Oh, I 'll show you how I can rake the hay to-morrow."

"I guess we did n't send ye to college ter hev ye come home an' rake hay," said her father, majestically. "Say! you ain't looked in the keepin'-room!"

"Yes, I did. And you 've gone and got an organ, and I can't play on it."

"I can," said her father.

"You darling old Father James! You can? Oh, won't that be the best yet! Only think of it! Mother and I will sing hymns and you will play them, Sunday nights. I never dreamed of that! How did you learn to do it, father?"

"Learned myself," he said, somewhat loftily. "Picked it out, an' pegged away. Found out some fum w'at I knowed of the accordion. Here, I 'll show ye!" And he left the table and threw open the door of the best room and the lid of the little house-organ; and bent laboriously over keyboard and pedal, he played the air of "Federal Street," if with a certain sameness in the left hand. And presently the two voices, young and old, were braided together with the droning harmony in a strain of music that could only have been pleasant in heavenly ears, however critical might have been earthly ones.

"I always knew you were full of music, Father James," said Lally, when they were finishing their supper more leisurely. "But how you contrived all this, I can't imagine. I 'm just as proud as a peacock!"

"Wal, I hed a try at them books ye sent home, and I found 't was no go. And I 'd bought the organ for you to have, an' there was the old book of hymn tunes, an' 'ith the help o' that an' w'at your mother

an' me learned to singin'-schule, I made out. An' sometimes 't was like havin' courtin' days over again — warn't it, mother?"

"You 're a genius! That 's what you are. And mother 's a master hand at biscuit. I don't know when I 've tasted anything like them."

"There 's a little too much shortening," said her mother.

"Your mother took fust prize to the County Fair," said her father, with an air, yet with pleasant condescension from his recent pedestal, "for her loaf-bread an' her creamer-tarter, an' her butter, an' her currant jell, an' her darnin'!"

"I think Mis' Wabbles hed orter hed it for the jell," said the mother, modestly. "She puts a piece o' rose-geranium leaf in hern."

"And I took on thet consarned shorthorn heifer and on the colt!"

"That poor colt will never grow up. You 've had the premium on him for the last five years."

"No. Lemme see. Only three. But he 's a Morgan, an' there ain't any other Morgans in the county. He 's a beauty — sleek as satting — an' w'at he don't know ain't wuth knowin'. There ain't any knot he can't ontie with his teeth. I b'en in the habit o' takin' up Neighbor Thomas an' givin' him a lift. Thomas is ruther hefty, an' the colt don't like it for a cent. And one day I 'd left him a-standin', an' he see a big sailor come along that looked like Thomas, an' he

walks across, wagon an' all, and opens his mouth, an' takes the sailor by the scruff of the neck an' throws him down. An' then he stan's an' gives a reg'lar laugh, he was so pleased 'ith himself. Oh, he 's a great one! If I thought well o' racing — but then I don't," he said, ruefully. "Well, you shell hev a ride behind 'im to-morrer an' see. That is, ef we finish the hayin' — an', by glory! ef we don't!"

"Now, mother, you go and sit down," said Lally. "I 'm going to clear up. And I 'm going to skim the milk and scald the pans. I don't believe there 's anything makes you feel so rich as skimming the cream does. You lift the thick skins and you can't bear to leave an atom. Except it is when you 're hunting eggs and find two in a nest."

"No, no, now, Lally. I don't want you to. I 'm useter it! 'T ain't nothin' at all. And I don't want your hands all roughed up!"

"I guess my hands can stand it if yours can."

"That 's right, Lally," said her father. "Them old han's o' hern was as white as yours be once. Our han's hev growed old together, wife. With the wearin' o' years an' the wearin' o' work." And he took one of them and held it on his arm a moment, in spite of her reluctance.

It was over a house full of happy peace that the soft summer night fell. Now and then a breath from the distant salt marshes mixed the fresh sea-scents with the heavy richness of the lilacs, and mounted

and stirred drowsily in the tops of the great elm that housed all a world of small life in the depths of its green shadow; and a golden robin waked with a gush of song; and down in the cool dew of the grass a sparrow for an instant dreamed that it was morning; and like the shield of some great spirit the moon came up, and the faint mists fled before her; and far off from farm to farm through the wide obscurity a dog bayed in the deep of the night.

"You 'sleep, mother?" said Father James in a hollow whisper.

"No. Be you?"

"I ain't closed an eye. Seems though I did n't know how to say I 'm thankful enough to hev her back. Say — she ain't changed a mite."

"You can't change gold," said his wife. "'T will allus be gold."

"Thet 's so. She 's pretty 's a pink, now, ain't she? She puts me in mind of you, Emerline, w'en we fust begun to keep company."

"What talk! You go to sleep."

"But, Emerline — she 's so — so — like a flower. Do you s'pose, jes' s'pose, *she 'll* ever be keepin' company 'ith anybody?"

"I should hope so! Sometime."

"Well, I don't know, mother. I do' know 's I want ter give her up to the best man goin'. And he might n't *be* the best man goin'. I — I don't feel as if the Angel Gabriel 'd be more 'n good enough for

her. And I 'd ruther he did n't come round. I tell ye, w'en you 've done yer best for your child, an' sot your heart on her, an' look forrud to her holdin' the light to yer old age, 't ain't easy ter see another man come along an' snake her away from ye. I do' know 's I 'd like ter see her any man's wife — "

" She 'd be your daughter still ef she was twenty men's wives."

" Twenty men's wives! Why, mother — "

"Mr. James, your piller 's full of live-geese feathers. It 'll be sunup in no time. An' there 's the long medder to-morrer."

"You 're talking about me! I know you are!" cried a gay voice at the top of the stairs above. "If you don't stop I shall come down and talk too!"

" We ain't spoke your name!" cried her father.

"McGregor's dogs keepin' ye awake, Lally?" said her mother.

"Oh, no. But I 'm so happy I can't sleep! I 'll try again, though. Good night."

" I 'd like ter hed her come down, jes' ter see ef 't was really her," whispered her father. " Mother, you put yer hand on my eyes, an' mebbe I 'll go off. I guess that 's w'at 's the matter of me — *I 'm* too happy ter sleep." And under the calm, cool touch he was presently lost in happy dreams.

The bobolink's nest down on the floor of the long meadow, in its tangle of sunbeams and the shadow

of tall grasses, with the soft flower-scented wind stirring just above it, did not hold more happiness than this old farm-cottage held. But one day the shadow of a man fell athwart the grass and shut the sun away; and the bobolink knew it meant the morrow's mowing, and ruin. And one day Father James saw the shadow of a man fall across the farm.

It was in the shape of a letter handed to him at the little post-office, where he had gone to send his asparagus and rhubarb stalks to Salt Water. He had taken the letter between his thumb and finger as if it were a reptile, reading the boldly written address, "Miss Laura James," without his glasses, and with a feeling that some one was taking a liberty with his daughter's name; and he tucked it under the seat before driving home, the colt being in an antic mood.

"There was a letter for you, Lally," he said, when he came in. "But I put it under the cushing, an' 't ain't there now. Must 'a' joggled out. Dinner mos' ready, mother?"

"Father James!" cried Lally, stopping suddenly with the colander of pease in her hands. "Have you lost my letter? Oh, you don't mean so!"

"Wal, never mind. Le's hev dinner, an' then I 'll go back an' find it, ef you say so."

But Lally, waiting for no dinner, had snatched her hat from the entry nail while he spoke, and was off down the dust of the highway, searching both

sides as she ran, coming back contentedly before very long, the driver of a team following her father's having found the treasure and given it to her. She had sat down in a broken part of the stone wall, where the wild sweetbrier and blackberry vines climbed all about, and had read the letter, and looking round swiftly, had kissed the sheet before she read it, and afterward. And her father knew in his intimate consciousness that she had done so — whether by the flush on her cheek deep as a damask rose, by the blaze in her eyes like blue diamonds, or by some inner unknown sympathy.

She was swinging her hat, and coming leisurely through the hot sunshine. "I found it, father," she cried, joyously, as she saw him sitting on the door-stone. "Why, you need n't look so serious, dear. It 's no matter now. And you 've been waiting dinner!"

"I ain't no appertite," said her father ruefully.

"Well, I have!"

"Lally!" he said, staying her as she would have stepped past him, and looking straight into her wondering eyes. "Hev you got a feller?"

"What 's a feller, father?" her head on one side in a pretty mimicry of ignorance.

"A man that will take you away fum me!"

"There is n't any man alive who can take me away from you!" she said. And putting her arm over his shoulder, she went in with him, and ate her

dinner in spirits that were almost contagious. "Oh, how good this cherry-pie is!" she exclaimed. "What is there better than a cherry-pie?"

"Two cherry-pies," said her father.

"'The boy guessed right the very first time,'" she sang.

"Laura James, child," said her mother, "you 're at the table!"

"So are you, mother," said the child, who would have been spoiled if love could spoil anything, beginning to clear away the dishes. Her father had not moved, but sat with his elbows on the table and his head in his hands. Lally ran out to bring in her dish-towels from the grass.

"I s'pose you know w'at 's happened, mother?" he said. "She 's hed a letter. An' it 's jes' the beginnin' o' the end. I do' know but I 'd as lives she 'd never b'en born —"

"Mr. James, I 'm ashamed of you!" said his wife. "It 's temptin' Proverdunce. If we 'd never hed any more of her than jes' the happiness of this last week, we 'd hev hed enough to be grateful for the rest of our lives!"

Coming back for the hot water, Lally began singing again, half under her breath this time:

"There was a certain father
Who thought that he would rather
His daughter should stay single all her life,
Than be happy with a husband —

Husband — husband — oh, there is n't any rhyme to husband!"

"Nor reason, either," said her mother. "Now, Mr. James, that corn 's b'en growin' fur all it 's wuth these hot nights, and is fairly achin' ter be hoed."

"I 'm goin', mother, I 'm goin'," he said.

They were all sitting in the porch that evening, the twilight falling and faint stars showing. The Madeira-vine shed its sweet breath, and the fragrance of the Clethra-bush in the swamp blew softly about them, and the far-off crickets seemed only the singing of silence. "Is n't it perfect!" said Lally. "Oh, if you had been in the hospital wards as long as I was, with only the smell of drugs, this air would seem to you just blowing out of heaven!"

"I never quite liked your goin' ter the hospittle, Lally," said her father.

"Well, you see, it was just as I wrote you. If I stayed after I was through college to study medicine —"

"An' be a doctor!"

"It would have taken just as long again, and twice the expense —"

"Oh, consarn the expense!"

"But if I went into the hospital to be trained for a nurse, it would take only two years and no expense at all. And then plenty of work near home, where I could see you and come home for rest —"

"It don't seem jes' wuth w'ile ter go ter college ter be a nuss," said her mother.

"Yes, dear. I shall be all the better nurse. That is, if I 'm a nurse at all now," hesitatingly. "Perhaps I sha'n't be a nurse now, and you 'll think those two years in the hospital have gone for nothing. Only, if I had n't been in the hospital," — pulling down a piece of the Madeira-vine about her, — "I never should have met him, maybe."

"Him!" cried her father.

"Dr. Lewis. And knowing how to nurse, I may be of a great deal of use to him. Now I 'll tell you all about him!" she exclaimed. "He 's — he 's — well, he 's Dr. Lewis!" getting herself farther into the shadow. "And you can't help liking him; and he 'll come out here and settle, — old Dr. Payne 's looking for some one to take his place, you know. That is, if he thinks best after looking the ground over."

"'T ain't good enough for him, mebbe."

"Why, Father James, I should n't think this was you!"

"By George! I should n't think 't was! 'T ain't w'at I expected!"

Then an arm was about his neck, and a velvet cheek lay against his face a moment.

"It 's the way a bird's wing brushes by in the dark. They all leave the nest, they all leave the nest," he said, and rose stiffly and went in.

"He a'most creaked," said his wife, shortly.

"Oh, mother!" cried Lally, and hid her face in her mother's neck, and poured out her story, and was comforted.

Going to the village the next morning, Mr. James was handed another letter for Lally.

"Guess your Laury 's got a beau," said the postmistress.

"Her mother had one at her age," said Mr. James, dryly.

"S'pose she 'll be gittin' merried soon" — a foregone conclusion needing only the affirmative.

"Sooner or later," was the response. And he went home a little happier for having defended Lally from public curiosity.

"Guess the old man don't like it very well, he 's so short," said the postmistress to the crony who had happened in.

"Not the leastestest mite. He 's allus b'en consider'ble ambitioned for Laury. Nobody less 'n the Prince o' Wales 'd do for her."

"He 'll have to take up 'ith short o' that," said the other, putting back into the box the postal card she had been spelling over, and turning to her little shop. "She 's a good gal an' 'd orter hev a good man. But w'en a gal's father don't think well er the man, she 'd better let him be."

"Gals are mighty headstrong nowadays. But I would n't 'a' thought —"

"Oh, I ain't sayin' thet I know anything," said the postmistress, her face as blank as if great secrets hid behind it. It is disagreeable to confess you know nothing. You can look as if you knew a great deal.

"I hear, Mr. James," said the Elder, pausing on his parochial round that afternoon to look over the stone wall the farmer was mending, "that your daughter will not be long with us. I hope her choice is a wise one."

"First rate!" said Mr. James, taking out his big red handkerchief to wipe his forehead. "Could n't be better. Me an' her mother think she 's done first rate." And there he stood committed.

But that was for the outside. In his heart — Lally would never be happy with what was in his heart. And then a new thought struck him with a pang of joy. What if the fellow who had come to see Lally's folks should find things not quite up to his mark? — What! And break Lally's heart? And shame her before the whole parish, too? He threw down his crowbar, in a rage at himself, at Lally, at all the world, and went striding away as if he were trying to escape his shadow. It would not have made his pursuing thoughts calmer had he known that the same thought, if with a difference, had for the first time occurred to Lally.

It was sunset when he found himself sitting on a shelf of rock in the old quarry. The long red light

streamed over him and stained the lichens on the wall beyond. Down in the forsaken pit the waters of the pool were black. Well — it was time to go home; the boy had driven the cows up by this, and his wife was waiting for him to milk. There was no such thing as rest for him in this life, nor in the next one, either. He had brought the girl up; he had set his heart on her; he had gone without and spent himself that she might be made the perfect thing she was — and all to give her up now to another man. The perfect thing she was! It was not likely, then, that she would not choose as a perfect thing should. But what odds to him? He was going to lose her, just the same; and more — she would be wrapped up in that husband of hers, and in all the new concerns. That was the way of the world. Love went down; it did not run back. It was what other fathers had to put up with.

Soft purples began to filter through the red of the sunset. He heard a whippoorwill call, far off over the cranberry-swamp; and then there was a silver din of whippoorwills. He remembered the first time Lally ever heard one — she held out both her little hands to the evening star. "The star is singing!" she had cried. Ah, ah, what a lovely dear she was then! — what a lovely dear she was now! Like a great velvet rose. No wonder she had a lover! Of course, of course — that, too, was the way of the world. He would n't have liked it if she had n't had

one, he supposed. All the same, it was hard for him. It was hard for him that she did n't seem to care that it was hard. It was hard for him that he had to lose the daily sight and cheer of her. That it was n't to him she would come in joy or in trouble. That she put some one else before him.

He knew how it was. His own wife had left father and mother and cleaved only to him, and never thought strange of it. How had *her* father and mother felt? He recollected that the mother cried when they left; and the father choked up and turned away quickly. But they had let her go. They wanted her to be happy. They cared more for her happiness than for their own. They knew the time would come when she would not have them and would be alone if she had no husband or child. Why, they loved her better than they loved themselves! They were glad in her happiness, even. And all at once, in his high-wrought mood, like a flash of revelation came a quick acquaintance with the joy of sacrifice. All at once he made it his own. He sat staring before him, as if at a vision of angels, while the rosy afterglow welled up and filled the sky and fell away; and then he saw a star sparkling up at him out of the water, as if glad of his sudden gladness. He climbed to break off half a dozen big boughs of the wild black-cherry, loaded with their pungent fruit, and saw Lyra, blue as a sapphire, up there in the sky above him, looking down into the pool; and all the way home

he felt accompanied by something like spiritual and sympathetic sharers of his happy mood.

"Wal," he said to his wife, who was waiting at the gate, "I guess them cows are thinkin' it 's high time o' day — "

"That 's all right," she said. "Lally 's milked. The farrer kicked, though, an' spilled some. Where you b'en?"

"I do' know but I 've b'en a-rasslin' with the angel of the Lord, mother. Anyways, I come off with the blessing. Mother, I 'm real pleased at this young man of Lally's. W'y, it 'll be jes' the same 's a son to us!"

"I thought you 'd feel that way w'en ye come to think," said his wife. "Now we 'll have supper right away. I 'm afeard the pop-overs are flat as flapjacks, though."

He handed the boughs of black-cherry to Lally as he went in. "There," said he; "they 're puckery, but they 're good. Only they 'll make yer lips so black he won't wanter look at ye!"

To his consternation, Lally burst into tears and sprang into his arms. "I don't care whether he does or not!" she cried. "So long as I have you!"

"Sho! sho! Don't ye go milkin' them cows again. You 're all tuckered out. Don't you know — you 've got him, and us too!"

It had been a bitter day to Lally. At first a little indignant with her father for the way in which he

looked at her lover, she had turned the tables and wondered how her lover would look at her father — he city-bred, his mother's house a place of comparative luxury and elegance; he used to the refinements and graces of life. She had been away from the Settlement a long while; peculiarities had been forgotten or had grown strange to her; they were of no consequence. In her love and her reverence for her people, and in her delight in them, they had not worried her. But suddenly, looking at them with a stranger's eyes, they started out like sparks on the blackening ember. And then in turn she was indignant with her lover for seeing them. "If he does!" said Lally to herself, with a mysterious, unspoken threat. "Look with disdain on them, indeed! I would n't have father know it for a farm! If he does!" And the days of alternate doubt and uncertainty, of hope and fear, made her so restless that she wished she could go to sleep and not wake till Dr. Lewis came. And then she cried again, in a passion of tenderness for him too. But he should see them just as they were — her mother's toil-worn hands and rustic air; her father eating with his knife; the king's English!

When at last the day brought Dr. Lewis, he had already been to see Dr. Payne, and had satisfied himself concerning the professional outlook. And then the doctor dropped him at the farm. "You 're going to Mr. James's?" the doctor had asked, as they jogged along. "There 's a young woman there, just

back from college and hospital. One of the men cut himself with his scythe, mowing, and there was nothing left for me to do when I got there. Ah yes — I see. Well, sir, you 're in luck. That 's so. Yes, you 'll be seeing the inside of most of the families within twenty miles, before you come to my years, but I doubt if you find the equal of the Jameses in all your goings and comings. I never have. There 's a good deal goes on that 's between God and James alone; but, for my part, when I find a man naked to his enemies and just outside the prison gate, I send him up there and James takes him on the farm. Or, if I have anybody sick without a spot to lay her head, I go to Mrs. James, and she brings her home to nurse. Hot nights, dark nights, stormy nights, I don't know what I 'd have done in this village without that woman. Mrs. Dacre and Miss Mahala are independent guerrillas in our warfare; but Mrs. James was always under orders, my orders. Sam James could have made his fortune once merely by holding his tongue when the doubt was in his favor; but he spoke — and stayed poor. They sent him to the Legislature one term; but, by King! he was too honest for them! His word is better than another man's bond any day, and so was his father's before him. A childish sort of man, too; womanish; lives in his affections. Yes, they 're rough maybe, the Jameses; but they 're rough diamonds. Never brought me much practice, though; nothing ever ails them! "

Dr. Lewis came into the living-room, set about with jars of big green boughs, where a gray-haired woman with a certain shy dignity gave him her roughened hand, where a tall gaunt man with a beaming eye took him by the shoulder and wheeled him round that he might look into his face, and where Lally laughed and cried with one arm about him and one about her father. And then, the simple blessing asked, the plates were heaped, and before they were cleared Dr. Lewis was as much one of the family as if he had been born to it.

"Wait a minute," said Father James, before they rose. "I asked the blessing of the Lord upon this food. But now I want to give thanks for life and health and a new happiness, and a son!"

It was an hour or two later that Lally and her lover went straying through the dark down by the wheat-field, where the fireflies were flashing as if all the stars were falling. "Now," said Lally, "you have come. You have seen me in my home, my people in all their difference from yours. Do you still —"

"And you have been doubting me! I knew there was some bee in your bonnet. Do you suppose I don't know what it is to value people who live so near Nature that they have all her honesty and goodness?"

"And — and the king's English?" she asked, desperately.

"Lally, I would n't have thought it of you," he

said; but he held her fast. "You distrust me, you distrust them. Oh, you want it all cleared up? Well. Don't you know that every Scotchman speaks in his own dialect? That the Greek poets sang each in his own? That the English language is spoken in its purity only in old Mercia and in Massachusetts; and outside of that, one dialect is no worse than another? I fancy that love and truth are no less love and truth when spoken in this Doric. Lally, it makes me proud to think you born of such simple, noble souls as these!"

And Lally dropped his arm, and ran up the path through the blossoming yellow lilies, pale as spirits in the dark, and grasped her mother's hand, and threw herself upon her father's breast. "Oh, he says — he says," she cried — "he says that he is proud to be your son!"

THE IMPOSSIBLE CHOICE

X

The Impossible Choice

HE held the lamp low, shielding the flame with one hand, — a big, brown hand, used to strong work, — and looked down at the rosy faces in the wide bed.

There were three in that bed — a tangled mass of cherubs, one pillowed on another, and arms and feet thrust everywhere. There was Marnie, the first little girl that came after the older boy, her mother's mainstay, the sweetest thing that ever grew on earth, faintly flushed with sleep now, her curls in dewy rings. There was Betty, every one of whose freckles he loved, — fairy favors, he heard the Elder call them, — little Betty, the child that made trouble. There was Rhody, — he recalled the day the Elder christened Rhody, and she looked like one of those little angels you see in pictures, head and wings, and she began to sing in her baby way. No, it was out of the question: he could not let them go, his own three girls!

And in the trundle-bed there was Mamy, the pale, silent child he had taken home when his sister died, and had loved before he had any of his own to love. No, no, he could n't spare Mamy; she was always in a dream, but she was Mamy and his dead sister,

too. He knew nothing about Madonnas; but, if he had, he would have said the young girl Mary must have looked this way. He did not put things into words — but the worshipful feeling in his heart he had for her he might have had for that other Mary of long ago. He had some degree of worshipful feeling, indeed, for his own children, — they seemed to him such marvels, — called into existence as if one summoned spirits from the vasty deep. The baby slept with Mamy; her protecting hand still held the small blanket about him.

He stepped on lightly in his stocking feet to the room where the boys were, bowing his height in the doorway. The dark head of Charles lay on the pillow of the crosslegged bedstead. He had gone into infinite distance in a slumber deeper than dreams. The boy was his pride — a very different person from Harriman's Charlie; Harriman's boy would never have come to anything if he had lived. He expected great things from Charles. Some day this fellow would go to the Great and General Court. Yes, he would do justice to an education; he ought to have it — but he could n't. If there was any grit in him he 'd find a way himself. As for Tom and Billy, the little red-headed rascals in the other bed — why, without the twins the place would be as still as the grave. They had been fighting, and had fallen asleep with their arms locked in a wrestling grip, and would wake up and be at it again at daybreak. And then the ray of the

lamp caught a sparkle, and he saw a tear on little Jo's cheek; he had been sent to bed before the others, for some mischief he had done. That tear brought a tear to the father's eye. His mother was very tender of little Jo — doubly tender since the fall that lamed him. He must make up to the little lad for that tear.

But, good heavens, how was he going to make up anything to these children for having brought them into the world to work and want and poverty? That was what the woman said, that afternoon, when she wanted Louisy to give her one. Why were such women allowed to go about the earth? An angry sparkle shot across the long-lashed hazel eyes that little Jo had inherited.

He turned away, but looked back from the farther door, as a miser might look back at his treasure. His wife was standing there, leaning against the wall; he saw her shadow tremble. He put his arm over her shoulder, and they went down the narrow stairs together.

His wife sat in the rush-bottomed chair, very straight and rigid. You might have said that she was one waiting for sentence of life or death. He crossed to the other room and brought back the big and battered Bible, and opened it at the leaves following the Apocrypha, where lay all the family records they had. At the foot of the last page was the date of the baby's birth; there was hardly room for one more. It was not an unusual occurrence, by the

time the baby came. But Marnie's name made him recall the night when she was given back to them after the fever, and he went out into the wintry dark, and saw the stars shining in the deep midnight blue, far, far from universe to universe, and the crisp, white fields leading their level way to the great forest on one side, and into the soft, mysterious glow of the snowy horizon on the other. And he felt a sweet, unnamed sense of innocence about him, as if the soul of his mother had come out of the immeasurable spaces to watch over the little child. He shut the book hurriedly, and sat pulling at his sun-bleached beard.

"It 's no use," he said; "I can't give up one of 'em."

"It seems such a thin' for Marnie," said the wife. "Seems 's ef we had n't orter slight it. She 'd be fetched up like a lady. And she does love the thin's thet ladies has."

"She loves us more."

The wife sighed, a long, low sigh, and took up her knitting mechanically. "You don't suppose it 's stan'in' in Charles's light, do ye?" she said. "She 'd send him to school an' ter college, certain. He 'd know all there is ter know. He 'd be a great man, some day. He 'd stand a chanct of being President, mebbe."

"And we 'd be where we be!"

"I would n't let that hender," she said, bending low over her narrowings.

"I would."

"He ain't thet sort, anyway. Mebbe it would n't be right ter tek sech a chance away from him," she murmured, with another long sigh.

"It would n't be right to take away from him the chance of bein' loved by his own kinsfolks, of lovin' them back, or helpin' up his brothers and sisters. W'y, wife, I sh'd think you wanted ter git red of your children!"

She looked up, with a slow, bewildered look in her dark eyes. He had seen just such a look of soft reproach in the eyes of a creature he had had to kill. "It seems as ef we was doomin' of 'em."

"Doomin' 'em to what? I did n't know you was so onhappy, wife."

"Oh, I ain't, I ain't! But thet woman showed me the diff'runce, and it seems dretful selfish not to let 'em go," she said, in a moment.

"'T ain't. 'T ain't, nowise. They 're our'n. They 're our flesh an' blood. They 're our love an' life. There 's no injustice in their sheerin' our lot. Ef we was rich they 'd sheer it. An' so, as we 're poor, they can."

"I do' know," she said, rather slowly; "'t seems ter me thet I can see Mamy, now — the way the woman 'd dress her. She 'd look like a sperrit — "

"Mamy!" There was a note of horror in his voice, as if his dead sister stood ready to accuse him of unfaithfulness. "No, I tell you, no, Louisy! Ef we give one up, we 've got to do it teetotally, for

good an' all. We 're never ter see thet one agin. She ain't goin' ter hev it 'shamed of a lot of poor relations, bimeby."

"She could n't help its rememberin'," the mother answered, defiantly.

"All but the baby."

"She can't have the baby! She can't have the baby! That 's settled!" cried the mother, her shaking voice caught in a sob.

"I 'd ruther she 'd hev him than any of the others."

"No, no, no! My little baby! The helpless little thin'!" She rocked herself to and fro, her hands hiding her face, ashamed of tears, but glad of their relief. "I don't ask for much," she sobbed, "but 't seems 's if I might keep my own babies!"

"I sh'd think I was tryin' ter rob yer of 'em!"

"I do' know but what ye be!"

"Come, Louisy. Don't less quar'l over this. It 's too se'rus. You 're all worked up. The baby 's safe enough. She don't want no nussin' babies. An' little Jo 's safe, though he 's so pindlin' mebbe some delicate livin' 'd be the best for him—"

"Soon 's she see he was goin' ter be crippled, she 'd send him back, an' he 'd miss it more 'n ef he hed n't hed it."

"He 's one thet needs love, too, little Jo is," said the father, reflectively. "An' she could n't love him, no way, like his own folks."

There was no sound in the room, for a while, but the woman's stifled sobs. She looked up with a shudder; the whole black night seemed pressed against the pane and staring in; now and then the wind stirred a vine there with a restless tap. She rose to light another lamp. "It 's so dark," she said, "seems as if I could n't see to think. And it 's so still I 'll hev ter holler!" As the shadow crossed the window Shep woke outside, and far off Harriman's dog answered his bay.

"Folks can allus keep their dogs!" she said.

"There, there, there!" exclaimed her husband, "you ain't no need ter feel so, Louisy. I guess *we* can keep what 's ourn. They ain't gone yit. They ain't goin' — none of 'em. I 'll take the hull blame business on me. W'y, yes, s'pose thet pesky woman lost her money! Where 'd the child be then?" — and he started to his feet and walked up and down the kitchen.

"Yes!" cried the mother, looking up eagerly from the lamp she was adjusting, whose flame glittered in her tears; "s'pose she did! 'T ain't impossible, is it, now?" Then she tried to brush the tears back.

"An' that puts a new face on it, you see. We ain't stan'in' in their light sech an all-fired lot, be we? Wal, I was goin' ter say we 'll sleep on it, an' see how it looks in the mornin'. Sleep sometimes seems ter winner thin's. But I guess we may as well

thrash it out neow. Thet woman says it will be a great thin' ter be saved from work. But I do' know's I want ter save the boys work. Work ain't no hardship."

"'Thouten there 's tew much of it!"

"An' there 's a kind o' relish to the livin' you git outen the yarth. W'en we 've done with it, the farm 'll cut up inter market gardings for the boys. It ain't ever been worked fer half its wuth."

"An' some of 'em may take ter trades. Jo 's a regular whittler a'ready," said the mother, picking up her knitting again; "but there 's the little gels."

"They 'll marry!" said their father. But then something dashed the triumph of his tone. "Leastways, it 's likely. There 's husbands enough — sech as they be. I do' know. I 'd kinder ruther they stopped ter hum whilst we did."

"A lot of little gran'children ain't so bad," said his wife persuasively. "I would n't hev anybody miss the pleasure we 've hed in our young 'uns."

"And the little folks 'll keep us young, comin' back and tumblin' roun'. Wal, I guess we 'll chance it. Durn the woman! She thinks, because a man 's got six or seven children — how many be they, Louisy? I never can keep count, 'thouten I lot 'em off on my fingers."

"There 's nine — countin' Mamy."

"So they be. Wal, I guess there 's love enough ter go roun', and porridge, tew. Ary one on 'em 's

got a better lookout 'n Harriman's poor youngster. How many 've they buried, Louisy — the Harrimans?"

"All they hed, but this one. She was a dretful shif'less creeter."

"'T ain't every one 's got your faculty, Louisy."

The color mounted to his wife's face and burned out the freckles there. "The poor thin' never hed no stren'th," she said. "She was jes' beat out, like a flower in the wind. She was well meanin'."

"So 's Harriman. He 's a-bringin' of it up by han'."

"My! He 'll never raise it — an' this weather, tew. It 'll foller its mother, sure. I wish 't — " she paused, and began to wind up the ball.

"Wal — what is it you wisht?"

"Oh, nothin'. 'T ain't no matter — excep' fer a'-temptin' Proverdunce. I was goin' ter say 't I wish 't we had n't so many of our own, so 's we could help Harriman."

"Louisy, I would n't darst say sech words. P'raps we hev got more 'n our sheer. And it bears on a poor man, fer a fac'." He stared hard at the crack in the yellow, whitewashed wall.

"But, you see," she added, brightly, "they ain't one too many!"

The clock struck stroke after stroke, with an air of finishing the business. "Wal, I 've gotter put the taller on my boots," he said, stretching his long

length, with his arms above his head; "guess this lamp 'll jest about last us" — as his wife turned out the one she had so recklessly lighted.

"Talk o' work. I do' know 's there 's any pleasanter feelin' than jes' bein' tired."

"When there 's no more to du," she answered. "Did you let the cat out?"

"Yes. There he 's on the winder, neow. You let him in whilst I wind the clock. What you barrin' the door for?" he cried, turning about. "That door ain't never bin barred. I guess the bolt 's too rusted to be drawed."

"I do' know," she answered, nervously; "the children —"

He laughed. "I guess nobody won't git them children 'ith me roun'," he said. "I wonder thet woman did n't want this clock!"

"Ain't I told you? W'y —"

"Wal, she can't hev it, little Johnny. It was gran'sir's, and it 's goin' ter be gran'baby's. There! I 've gotter be down to the last bars by the time the birds stirs. I 'll fetch my dinner along. An' w'en that critter comes by, you can tell her we ain't doin' no tradin' in children, an' our'n 'll stay where God put 'em. But she can have the old sekkerterry she was hankerin' arter — fer w'at 's fair. Did she really say fifty dollars?"

His wife nodded several times with emphasis.

"By mighty!" he cried, with his eyes flashing,

"I sh'd think she hed a screw loose. Don't seem reasonable. King! she ain't fit to be trusted with money, let alone children. W'y, I ain't hed so much as thet in han' since Bates was hung! Seems like highway rob'ry, or blackmail, or suthin'. P'raps we 'd better say half that. 'T ain't no use to us."

"I keep rawsberry jam in it, and the jell — thet is, w'en there 's any to keep. An' the sugar cookies," she added, hesitatingly. "I guess I 'd better say sixty. Ef she 's offerin' so much, she 'll give more. She 's made me sech a sight o' trouble I don't feel ter spare her."

"She did n't mean ter make yer no trouble, Louisy."

"Anyheow, she made it, — a-wantin' my children! An' she wants the old flowered chany, tew. For my part, I 'd ruther hev some new w'ite 'ith a gold band. And I forgit w'at she said she 'd give fer the spinnin' wheel in the garret, an' the brass warmin' pan, an' gran'marm's big copper kettle to set a s'rub or a christian-anthem. But I do' know es it 's jes' the thin' ter take advantage of a weak mind. Ef I knowed fer certain she wus n't a little off — why, father, I don' b'lieve but there 'd be enough to buy a parlor organ!"

"Ef we don't put it agin' Charles's schoolin'."

Her face fell a little. "Wife, I 'd like ter give ye all the desires of yer heart," he said, wistfully.

"I don't want anythin' but w'at I 've got!" she

cried, with a sudden passion, throwing her arms around his neck in unwonted abandon, and hiding her face a moment in his sleeve; "I 've got you and the children!"

"And I 've got the best wife, and they 've got the best mother in the hull of Christendom. Wal, we 'll hev to be a-stirrin' 'bout as soon 's we 're asleep, and it 's close to no time at all, neow."

"I 'm sorter sorry fer that woman, though," she said, standing off and twisting up her fallen hair. It was pretty hair still. "She 's a real lady. She 's real lonesome. She said 't would be like a sunbeam in the house, like flowers, like music. She 'd orter take two of 'em, she said."

"Sho! An' she can't hev one. Jes' hear that ere owl a-laughin' at it. That 's w'at I call music."

"She said I 'd no idee, 'th all them a-swarmin' roun', w'at it wus ter hev an empty house and an empty heart like hern."

"Wal, then, I 'm sorry fer her, tew. But I don't feel no call ter give her my children. You can give her the sekkerterry, ef yer wanter."

"You don't b'lieve the children ever 'll be a-layin' of it up agin' us, do ye?"

"I don't b'lieve they 'll ever need ter know anythin' about it, 'thouten you tell 'em. An' if they du, I guess they 'll think there 's nothin' in heaven above, or in 'arth beneath, or in the waters that 's under the 'arth, better 'n father an' mother love. By

George, there 's that durned rooster talkin' about mornin'!"

"Wal, you go 'long to bed. I 've got a sponge to set." She went to her work, quick-footed, light-hearted, her pulses singing a note of thanksgiving. Presently all was quiet in the old farmhouse, except for the slow ticking of the clock, and nothing stirred but the shadow of a climbing rose that the red waning moon threw on the kitchen floor, and that the cat crept round to watch cautiously and play with furtively.

Sunset was pouring a purple glory across the fields, the next evening, when the little girls ran to meet their father, who came up slowly and wearily and somewhat hesitatingly, carrying an odd-looking bundle quite beyond their reach. "I thought I 'd bring it, myself, this time, 'stid o' the doctor," he said; "but I ain't ast your mother yet ef she wants it. Wife," he added, as she came to the door at the tumult, "Harriman 's been killed by the fall of that old ellum he was allus 'lottin' ter cut down. An' I come by, an' there was this baby 'most perishin' — hungry as a bird that 's fell from the nest."

"You don't say! The poor soul!"

"I do' know. Your han's is pretty full up, now. But, ef they send it to the poor'us, it 'll die afore it knows w'at ails it. Somehow, I sorter felt pitiful for the little thin'."

"Oh, mother, mother," came a chorus from tip-

toeing, peering, clamoring children, "it 's a baby — another baby! Oh, you 'll keep it; do say you 'll keep it, mother! We 'll rock it, we 'll —"

"The poor mite! Here, father, give it to me," said his wife, holding out her arms, the wild-rose pink flushing up her face. "Men are the onhandiest — goodness, it ain't no heft at all! Dear sakes alive, there 's nothin' to it! Poor Harriman! — there! 'T ain't much more trouble ter fetch up two together than one. I 'm glad you was goin' by, father!"

A VILLAGE DRESSMAKER

XI

A Village Dressmaker

THEY might have reminded one of the chorus of old voices in a Greek play — the two old women in the last daylight, with but one thought between them; their interest was so impersonal. Life was to them a grave affair; they regarded its slow unfolding with serious, apprehensive eyes. Its tone was that of the dull russet of the long fields and round-backed hills that made their dreary outlook most of the year. They expected nothing fortunate. Their dead level of monotony was disturbed by only one ray of sunshine — the going and coming of Susanne.

"I do' know but it makes me feel real young again, ter see Susanne come along," said one of them, her needle in the air. "She rises the hill like a bird. There 's a color in that face, and a touch and go in them feet, thet puts me in mind o' myself fifty years sence. It 's a gret while ago. Oh, I 'd liketer be young again. But there, what 's the use!"

"No use at all," sighed the other, holding at a new angle her needle's impossible flower. "No more 'n ter run ef ye see the sky a-fallin'. I 'd 'a' made thin's diffrunt, seems ter me. Leastwise so fur 's a woman's growin' old comes to."

"There would n't be gran'mothers an' gret-aunts, ef they did n't grow old."

"I guess the gran'mothers an' gret-aunts might be considered. You better believe they don't like it. I guess the children can go 'thout gran'mothers better 'n the gran'mothers can go 'thout youth."

"I think it would be good to be a gran'mother."

"I 'm 'shamed on ye, Cely! I 'd liketer be Susanne's age forever!"

"That 's askin' tew much, Ann. I do' know but w'at I 'd liketer stayed — say forty, a hunderd year. W'en yer forty, ef you was pretty you 're pretty still, and ef you was n't you 're jes' beginnin' ter be — in a different way; an' you 've got real common-sense fer the fust time. Yes; I 'd liketer 've stayed forty a hunderd year, an' then be blowed away."

"You 'd be dreadin' the blow dretfle, come the ninety-ninth," said Miss Ann, with an absent look.

"I 'd feel I 'd hed my sheer. As 't is, you don't no sooner sense thin's, 'n puff, they 've gone by!"

"Wal, I 'm glad Susanne 's young, anyway. It makes me ache sometimes ter think on her growin' old like us."

"She won't grow old like us," said Miss Celia, bringing her gaze back from outdoors. "Don't ye see w'at makes thet step so light? Her heart jes' lifts her feet. He ain't wuth it, ef he is Squire's son. Lor', I knowed his mother! But gels will be gels to the eend o' the chapter."

"To the eend o' the chapter," sighed Miss Ann again. And she threaded her needle and went back to her tambour-work. "Don Davison 's a takin' feller," she said. "His father was afore him. Seems ter me my spettacles ain't no kind o' good!" And she glanced furtively at her sister.

"Anyhow," said Miss Celia, "I s'pose we 've gotter be content 'ith thin's as they 're ordered."

"Content 's one thin', an' happiness is another," said Miss Ann, snipping her thread.

"Then, ef we can't hev happiness of our own, we 've gotter git it makin' the happiness of others. An' for my part I 'm happy w'en I see Susanne happy."

"So be I, so be I! There she is now"; as Susanne came in with her arms full of parcels.

The eyes were bright, large, soft hazel eyes. But the seashell color on the cheek was the work of the wind, and already fading. The smile, however, made the face luminous. If they had not loved the girl neither of the old sisters would have liked that madonna type; but a painter might have called her beautiful. A certain serenity of nature, apparent in the quiet face, made you think of the shrine where a lamp burns on a windless night.

Don Davison himself thought Susanne only pleasant-looking. But he had known her since childhood; and at last he had decided that, in default of better, her companionship for life was his desire. And

Susanne, whose emotions had revolved around him silently for years, went walking on air.

It was agreed that nothing should be said of the affair at present, except to the old aunts. Her happiness was so great, Susanne would keep it to herself awhile before people picked it to pieces. They would think Susanne was doing very well for herself — she the dressmaker of the region, he the son of Squire Davison, but lately come into his inheritance. Not so much of an inheritance to be sure but a large one for the Settlement that as yet had neither name nor certain government.

"Wal, Susanne," said the old aunts in chorus, "Mis' Brooks satersfied? Pay ye?"

"Yes, indeed, Aunt Ann. More than I expected, Aunt Celia. She said she'd never had one set so since the gown she stood up to be merried in!"

"Sho! She ain't ever been marri'd."

"And that put me in mind — and what do you guess I did? I'm most 'shamed to tell! I walked clear 'way down to get the stage to Salt Water, so 't the folks here would n't know." And the blush mantled her face again as she unrolled first a piece of sheer muslin, and then a roll of net, and then a cloud of tulle.

"For the land's sake, Susanne!" cried Miss Ann.

"A weddin'-veil!" cried Miss Celia.

"Yes. It warn't dear, either. The other thin's were cheap. I'd always thought they cost lots more.

I'll embroider the musling," fluffing it over her hands, "and let in the net in sprays an' branches, and it 'll look like frost on the pane — "

"'T will be reel lace," said Miss Celia.

"But, my gracious, child, the time it 'll take!" said Miss Ann.

"I shall do it in the odd minutes. I would n't think of it, only — you know, — his — his wife" — and the blush followed the word again — "ought to come to him in the best." In the fullness of her heart she must speak to some one — and the old chorus was, after all, a part of herself. And then, to take their eager eyes from her face, she threw net and tulle over them, as they held their heads together, till they looked as if a snowstorm had fallen on two gnarled and withered trees. And she lifted a corner, and fell upon them with kisses, and gathered it all about herself in surprise, as Don came in and stared at her, having no idea Susanne could ever look like that!

She hurried her finery away before she went out into the orchard with Don. But when later she took it up to the spare room, where she did her sewing, and planned the way she would cut and let in the lace for the garlands of flowers, she was in such an ecstasy as painter or sculptor knows over the dream of his ideal, and it seemed to her that beauty could do no more.

The orchard was always a treasure-house to Su-

sanne. After long wintry weather the first swelling of its buds was like the promise of a friend; and when the twisted boughs were wreathed in bloom, she felt the presence of sweet unknown force, and walking under the fragrant boughs she often impulsively and unconsciously lifted hand and face to caress them. "I shall work apple-blossoms," she said. "I owe it to them. The dear apple-tree stands by the door, and is a part of home, and stretches its boughs like a great brooding mother-bird. There could n't be anything better for a wedding-gown."

It was very inexpensive stuff, the muslin, the bobbinet; but the art of her fancy and her fingers would make it something fine, as the woman marrying Don ought to wear. She knew nothing of mighty Chapman's Helen of Troy, "shadowing her beauty in white veils," but the picture she had of herself when Don should see her arrayed in this snowy cloud — no, the picture she had of Don, at that future moment, made her heart stand still with joy.

How long she had loved him — with what worship! And no one had ever guessed it. He had never known it till now. She had never let her thoughts dwell on it an instant, till its compressed intensity startled her into blushes whenever Don was near; blushes that made her all at once so radiant that he wondered at himself for dallying — and dallied then no longer.

Susanne would have plenty of time for the work

she planned; her aunts, who added to their little income by transferring the French embroidery on old capes and collars and kerchiefs to new ones — which they sent away to acquaintances who paid a trifle for them as for things they really did n't want — having long ago taught her all their pretty open and closed stitches. Don was starting for the West, where were some doubtful mortgages of his father's, and it would take time to adjust affairs there. And although Susanne would cut and baste most of the summer and fall gowns for the upper and lower parishes of the Settlement she would have this also done by October. And it was then that she would go to the old place under the sycamores where Don was born and where she meant to make his life as happy as a fortunate dream. What hopes, what prayers, what tenderness, what faith went into those odd moments of her weaving flower and leaf and stem, while her flying needle left the trail of snowy bud and bloom behind it! You, who have ordered your wedding splendor from afar, can guess of it. You who have wrought with your own hand, counting the threads, can feel the old thrill in thinking of it. And neither of you can have had anything much lovelier than the mimic frost-work fallen on all the folds when the task was finished.

Don wrote from the West, of course. If the tone of quiet affection in the first letter touched her passionate adoration with a chill, she rebuked herself. She said that was Don's way; he had always found

it difficult to express himself fully. She knew he loved her; he had said so. That was enough. She read and re-read what he did say, and carried the letter next her heart till another came. But she answered it in the same tranquil phrase; anything else she felt indelicate.

As time went on, to be sure, another was slow to arrive. But what of that? He trusted her to understand; it was all the more welcome when it did come, even if brief, and, as she might have thought, a trifle cool.

It was long past the promised date when Don himself arrived. Being in the West it had seemed worth while to see it and have its experiences. At last he wrote that all was done for the present; but he would have to go out again some day, and then he would be taking his wife with him. The phrase made Susanne's face burn and ripple with smiles, and tears of pure happiness overflowed her eyes like live crystals.

She could not help showing that letter to her aunts; and the old chorus trembled and fluttered and exclaimed together, and felt the action of the drama, and went secretly to break off a fragment of the remnant of the wedding-cake, baked in a saucer, and taste it with deliberation and chirping, and pronounce it as good as that of Susanne's mother — "at least, if there had been just one drop more of the O-be-joyful in it!"

And while they were doing that, Susanne went and looked at the wedding-gown overlaid with the veil, finished and put away in one of the deep drawers of the old armoire, with a reverent joy. It was the outward and visible token of Don's love and of all her blest future.

And after that a week passed, and other weeks. There was a light then in Don's room in the old mansion; a light in the dining-room there, too. Don would be with her presently. She kindled a fire on the hearth of the keeping-room, and waited. The clock in the other room struck nine; a long hour, and it struck again. She heard her aunts make ready for the night, and go creaking upstairs, glad in what they thought her gladness. And still Don did not come. The fire threw strange shadows about the dim place — disquieting shadows; they seemed to threaten her. An owl in the beechwood thicket at the foot of the orchard began to shrill his unearthly laughter as if he were mocking her.

There were no lights now in the Squire's house. It must have been a mistake; probably the housekeeper had been arranging the rooms for him. She went to the door and looked out at the night, the soft purple starry night across whose deep a meteor slipped. It gave her a strange sensation of change — how soon gladness and grief would be gone — and the stars above still there! She could not have told why it impressed her with foreboding and dull terror.

But the next day she knew that without doubt Don was at home. The postmaster had seen him going into Captain Mayhew's. Captain Mayhew had lately come up from Salt Water and bought the Hills' place. Then he would certainly be with her before night, she said. It was impossible to sew. She went joyously down the orchard, that he might come after her there in all the spicy odors of the apple heaps; and she sat looking out at the champaign country that stretched below and beyond till lost in violet vapors. But although she lingered till the red sunset burned like a coal in the ashes of the mists, and the smoke of burning woods and stubble was heavy and pungent on the air whose evening chill wrapped her like a cold cloak, Don did not come.

Susanne rose with a heavy heart in the morning. The bright blue garish day made her dizzy. She knew she had no right to feel so, but something told her Don would never come again. She assorted her patterns, and sharpened her scissors, and went to work.

"Cely," whispered Miss Ann, her eyes looking as if they had seen a ghost, "did you know Don Davison was to home?"

"I seen him ten days ago," said Miss Celia. "He was along 'ith that Mayhew gel — the one thet 's jes' home fum the 'Cademy. An' he was lookin' 's ef he never see blue eyes an' yaller hair afore."

"Rony Mayhew is kind o' pretty — peaches an' cream sort. Should n't you 'a' thought he 'd 'a' b'en ter see Susanne fust thin' ? "

"Cert'in."

"S'pose she knows he 's back ? "

"Look an' see," said Miss Celia.

"Oh, Cely ! Oh, Ann ! " sighed the old chorus, as at some remembrance too remote for tears. " You rekerlek his father ! "

Yes, Susanne knew. She was going about in a half bewildered way. Her face had grown pallid, her features sharp, her wide-open eyes had the gloom of eyes that look into a bottomless abyss.

"She 's thinner 'n her own shadder," said Miss Ann.

"Don Davison don't desarve no sech feelin'."

"An' his father did n't afore him," they sighed together again in chorus.

One day came a last letter to Susanne. Don told her that it was best he should be frank. That he had thought she was the one he would take home, and with whom he should live his life. If she held him to the bond, it should be so now, and no more said. But when he made the bond he had not seen Rowena Mayhew. Now, life would hardly be worth living without Rowena. Of course he was not sure; but he thought Rowena felt as he did. He was glad no one had been told of their past relations. He would never speak of them — not even to Rowena. He

was fond of Susanne; but he hoped she would see there had been a mistake, and remain his friend, as he was always hers.

His friend! The great tide of love surged back upon her heart, a frozen flood. To be thrown away like a leaf withered in one's hand! To suppose she could hold him to his bond! And for that child! She walked the room as if driven by a whirlwind; and then she sat among her threads and thrums and patterns, turned to stone. But at last the drop of angry blood fired all the rest; she tore the letter, whose only warmth was that she had given it, from its resting-place, put it with this and with the others, with the pencil case he had given her, with the slender gold chain that had been his mother's, and that she had taken with a double love, his dead mother having to her a certain religious sanctity. And she took the ring, that she had worn on a ribbon round her neck, the little plain band that was to have been her wedding-ring, and to be buried with her that she might rise with it on her hand the last day; and she made a parcel and went out after dark, her head wrapped in a shawl, and left it in the hands of the old woman who opened the Davison door and peered after her. "Looks like Susanne," muttered the old housekeeper. "But can't be. 'T ain't jes' her size, neither. Can't be thet Mayhew gal, mebbe? They 're about of a talth." And her old heart leaped with hope; if the Mayhew girl had brought back Don's

presents, she, who had grown gray in the place, would not be leaving it.

And Susanne, hurrying home in the black night, with the wind blowing up storm, wished that the darkness might swallow her, and annihilate her, and hinder her forever from all knowing and feeling. Storm and darkness had always terrified Susanne; she had felt like a straw, a mote, in the grasp of the strong unseen wind. But now they were a part of her — if they could but take her to themselves!

Susanne sat down in her ashes. And the old aunts sat in ashes, too.

"It's too bad, dears, to make you so gloomy," said Susanne at last, one morning when the world seemed wrapped in a gray veil. "You must n't think I care. Much, that is. Only it is gettin' used to the change." And by and by, when her aunts heard her singing over her work, a gay song she had many a time sung with Don, they looked at each other in consternation, and then looked out of the window to see if the snow were really falling, or if it were only the drift of the cherry-petals of last spring, when the bees were swarming, and before any of this coil came about.

"Land sakes, how can she!" said Miss Ann.

"I 'd 'a' thought she 'd b'en more tenacious," said Miss Celia. "But he 's ben gone this some time, and absence is like hangin' suthin' on the line to fade."

Susanne had carried to the Elder's wife the new

alpaca she had cut and basted for her. It had stopped snowing; and the wide country-side, in its soft folds of white under the pale purpling sky, that a month ago would have made it seem as if the round earth were taking wings, now stretched like the desert of her forsaken life before her. Nothing mattered any more.

"Massy sakes, Susanne!" her Aunt Ann exclaimed, as she came in, staying the pruning of her red geraniums, "who do you guess hes b'en here?"

"You 'll have ter know. It 's Rowena Mayhew," said her Aunt Celia, before Susanne had time to guess. "She 's brought her trousser, she says. She wants you to make her dresses."

"Make her dresses!"

"Wal, I thought so, too, the little tyke! But then again you might n't wanter lose the job; an' set folks ter talkin', tew. And I told her ter leave the thin's—"

"Oh, that 's all right. I 'll make them," said Susanne unconcernedly. "How good that gingerbread smells! I 'll have a piece."

"Dear me, dear me!" said the old chorus again, when she had gone. "How can she!"

But Susanne did not let herself think. What difference did anything make? It was all in the day's work.

Rowena came to the village dressmaker the next day; and Susanne took her up to the sewing-room. It was impossible not to see how pretty the girl was

as she hovered over and undid the parcels. What jewel eyes under their long, curling lashes, what rose-leaf skin, what sweetness in the smile! How innocent the little thing was, — perhaps how ignorant, — but what a childish grace and charm! No wonder, no wonder — Not that Susanne thought any of this; it was only the instant's impression.

"There 's two prints, and a white piqué, and a cashmere, and an organdie, and a silk, and a blue flannel wrapper. And I think that 's doing pretty well, don't you?" said Rowena. "I did think of goin' to the city. Father said I might. But you made Mis' Brooks's thin's so stylish — "

"You 're real kind," said Susanne, as she was expected to say, leaning on the tip of the scissors.

"No," said Rowena, "you 're the kind one, to make 'em with all you have to do, and me in such a hurry. And then, you know it 's savin' to me, the difference in price, and I 'll have that much more to spend on the parlor. I want a parlor all my own, and not his mother's an' gran'mother's old thin's!" Susanne caught her breath; they would have been so sacred to her! "Of course, Mr. Davison says he 'll git everythin' I want," continued Rowena. "But you know I don't want him to git everythin'!"

"No," said Susanne. "How you goin' ter have them made?"

"I don't know. How would you?"

"They 're nice colors," said Susanne.

"Oh, I see you love pretty thin's, an' so do I," cried Rowena. "I know you 'll make them up elegant!" And she threw off her wraps and began to rummage among Susanne's poor fashion-plates. "Oh, it don't seem true, it don't seem possible," she said, looking up, — the large, liquid eyes like blue flowers full of dew in the morning, — "that it 's me, that I 'm goin' to be married — and to him! You 've known him this ever so long — don't you think he 's — he 's — "

"He 'll make you a real good husband," said Susanne. "This cashmere would go well with terra-cotta bands."

"And is n't this organdie lovely? I 'll have it flounced," and she threw an end of it round her face and ran to the glass. "Won't I look like a rose in it? Don says I will."

"I 'll take your measures," said Susanne. "You can come this day next week" — when she had set down the last number.

"Oh, can't I come before that? You know there is n't so very much time. Don 's in such a takin' to have it soon."

"I 'll put by Mis' Ruggles's caliker, an' you can come to-morrer," said Susanne.

"You 're jest an angel!" cried Rowena. "I wonder Don did n't take you instid o' me! He 's known you so long — and you 're so good. And you 're reely so pretty, too! But love goes where it 's sent,"

she added sagely. "My! You must be tired! You've gone all white. Why don't you set down an' rest? He give me this watch" — putting it on again. "It was his sister's. His sister and I would have ben reel good frien's. How I am talkin'! There 's somethin' about you makes me — I don't know why. You 're jest the same 's you was at the Districk School when I was a tot an' you useter take me into your seat an' give me nice bits of your dinners an' wash my face an' han's, an' kiss me afterwards. You listen — an' your great, serious eyes — don't you never smile? Oh, I have n't had any one I could say thin's to, and I 'm so happy I can't keep it to myself! I don't suppose you can understand it as well as if you 'd ever b'en engaged yourself. It 's — it 's like a new world. Don says he never was truly in love before, and I 'm sure *I* never was! And I never dreamed of such good luck — it is good luck, is n't it, to marry a good man; and a man you — you care for; and a rich man, too, you know! I shall be the great lady here. Won't the Academy girls over to Ramoth be surprised! Oh, I know you think I 'm dretfle silly, runnin' on so! I know I had n't orter — "

"That 's all right," said Susanne, taking the pins out of her mouth. "Now you can go."

"But can't I stay and sew with you?" asked Rowena wheedlingly, her pretty head on one side. "I 'd love to!"

"No. I should n't git along so fast. Here 's your jacket. Good-bye." And the little person found herself outside the door, without knowing exactly how she got there.

Susanne flung her scissors across the floor, and fell herself, with her arms outstretched and her face hidden from the light of day. She could not have endured it another moment. Her brain was burning; her heart was a lump of ice. If she could only die! Perhaps an hour passed before she lifted her head. Everything in the familiar room seemed strange. Something had happened; some shock had thrown her off her balance. Yes, she had been forsaken for this little creature who did not know when to speak and when to be silent, who wore her heart on her sleeve! Oh, to be sure, the gowns — well, she would make them; she would make them so frivolous, so fit for a butterfly, that her husband should see and understand! She dragged herself up, and went across the narrow entry-way to her own room, and threw herself upon the bed, wishing she were never to leave it. And then a great sigh tore itself up to her lips, and she fell to crying bitterly, and in the midst of sobs and tears she was asleep.

When Susanne awoke, it was with the prosaic and practical assurance that she was wasting time shockingly. She bathed her face and smoothed her hair, and put on a fresh neck-ribbon; but her hands trembled so — not with cold, for the room was warmed

by the pipe from the kitchen below — as she replaced the box, that she knocked the cover off another, the one where her little treasures were kept, her mother's bosom-pin and yellow old marriage-certificate, certain bits of lace and dried flowers, and the small photograph of Don that she had not had the strength to return. There he looked back at her with grave, unsmiling eyes that made her heart shake as she gazed. She went to the old armoire and opened the deep drawer, and hung over the lovely whiteness lying there in the dusk, with its half-dressed wreaths of snowy bloom shining under the veil. So white, so still, so fair — it was her dead happiness laid out there. How peaceful, how beautiful! Oh, she had said the best was not too good for Don's wife! What matter who the wife might be? "No, no, no, Don!" she cried. "I will do my best. I will, I will do my best!" And she went back to the other room and picked up her scissors.

She would do the organdie first. She would make the fine pink tissue all ruffles; the girl should look, as she had said, like a little rose in it, a hundred-leafed rose, the pretty thing! Small marvel that Don had dropped a gray stalk of rosemary for such a flower as that! Small marvel that he loved her. Who would n't? As she began to snip and sew, it almost seemed to Susanne then that she loved the girl herself. It was not her fault that Don had chosen one and flung another away; it was her good fortune. As

for Susanne herself, was there anything in the world Don wanted that she would not give him? He wanted this pretty dear for his wife. She ought to be glad — she was glad! — that he could have her. She should go to him as his wife ought to go, dressed as if the wand of a fairy godmother had touched her!

Before the other gowns were quite finished, Rowena brought in the stuff for the gown in which she was to be married. It was a dazzling day of blue sky, with great clefts of ultramarine in the snow, whose sheets made a rosy glow in the blinded eyes; but suddenly it grew gray to Susanne.

"I wanted white satin," said Rowena. "But mother said there'd be no use for it afterwards. I like a bride in white satin — don't you? All shining and angel-like in her veil. I could have had it dyed, too, and worn it a lot. But mother thinks this nun's-veiling 's good enough — and what mother says goes. And I know you can dress it up with lots of little white satin ribbons. Somehow, white woolen stuff does look dreadful like a shroud. My goodness, you don't suppose that 's ominous? I 'm awful superstitious. If anything happened to me it would break Don's heart. And, oh, I want to live, I 'm so happy!" And the tears overflowing her limpid eyes made them now like stars shining in the dew of violets.

But the nun's-veiling lay in its papers a good many days before Susanne opened them. "Why,

you have n't touched it!" exclaimed Rowena in dismay.

"There 's plenty of time," said Susanne, not looking up.

"Why, no, there is n't. There 's hardly any time at all. I thought you 'd have it ready to try on. I 've b'en lookin' forward to it. I 'm reel disappointed," — rolling the head of her hat-pin in her mouth as she spoke.

"I had ter finish Mis' Lawyer Jones's skirt. She 's goin' away an' could n't wait."

"I 'd 'a' come an' helped you. You 'd only had to send. Won't you begin this now?"

"I 'll see," said Susanne. "To-morrer, mebbe. I 'll send for you w'en it 's ready to try on."

But days passed; and Susanne had not sent for Rowena. She said to herself she did not know what possessed her. It seemed impossible to touch the stuff. How could she make the gown for another woman to wear when marrying Don! The alternations of feeling, of determining and of hesitating, so wore upon her nerves that she went to bed with a headache that made her hands useless for anything but wringing.

"I suppose you 're all ready for me?" said Rowena, coming in eagerly, a tinge of anxiety on her joyousness.

"I will be to-morrer, shore," said Susanne.

"Oh, you said so before!"

"I've b'en sick."

"Yes. I 'm reel sorry. You 're all right now? I 'd 'a' come an' rubbed your head; I 'm good at helpin' headaches. But the time 's mighty short, Susanne, dear. I don't want to have to put off my weddin'," — with a pout. "It 's terrible bad luck. An' Mr. Davison 'll feel so bad!"

"Oh, well, you won't have to. You come Tuesday."

And Rowena came Tuesday. And there lay the white veiling still uncut.

"I declare I could cry!" she exclaimed. "You 're treatin' me reel mean! I 'm sure you 've had it long enough. And you promised! You promised!" And the blue eyes shot fire.

"Look here! You take it to Mis' McIvor, down to Salt Water, — she 'll do it."

"Oh, she can't do anything like you! She ain't got a speck o' style. Besides, they 've got scarlet fever in the house. And there ain't any one else." And she looked out the window with eyes held wide open lest the tears spilled. "I 've gotter go over to Meridian to see Aunt Stearns this week, too, — she 's goin' to give me a whole set of French chiny. And you see that leaves no time at all for fittin' an' alterin'. Oh, I don't want to cry an' make my eyes all red, — you did n't useter treat me this way, Susanne. I do feel so worried!"

"You need n't worry. Go over to Meridian. I

can make it fit me. And if it fits me, it will you."

"You truly will have it ready, Susanne? Cross your heart? Hope you may die?"

"Hope I may die," said Susanne solemnly. And she did hope so.

Rowena had returned from Meridian; and she ran in like a thing of sun and summer. It was nipping weather outside, with raw March winds; but as she saw her, Susanne thought of a breeze rioting among roses. She made a quick movement to throw something over the table, where the veiling lay, scattered in loose blocks, not even pinned together.

"I thought you'd keep your word!" cried Rowena accusingly.

"I had Mis' Cap'n Symon's mournin'," said Susanne sullenly. "And everythin' hes ter give way ter mournin'."

"Oh, what am I goin' to do!"

"Wear your organdie."

"And look that way, when a bride should look all white an' sweet an' solemn!"

"You could n't look solemn," biting off her thread.

"I 'll have to stand up in that gray travelin' dress," cried Rowena with a sob. "And there 'll be no white procession a-sweepin' in. And I can't wear a veil. An' no goin' upstairs to change my dress! And it 's your fault. Susanne, I 'll never forgive

you till the longest day I live! You've just spoiled my weddin'! And I don't believe Don'll forgive you, either, when I tell him! He asked me why I came to you to have my dresses made, anyway."

Susanne did not look at her. "I can't help it if folks die," she said. "Mournin 's mournin'. Gownds fer funerals are jest as needfle as gownds fer weddin's."

"It 's awful for you to talk so! It throws a gloom over everythin'. Mournin' an' funerals! An' me so superstitious. And I never heard of disappointin' a bride of her weddin' gownd. I would n't 'a' done it if I 'd had to set up nights. It 'll hurt your business a lot. You don't know how you 've disappointed me. You can't have a speck o' feelin'. You don't know how bad I feel!" And she wiped her eyes with the only dry spot left on her poor scrap of a handkerchief, and went out like a bird drooping its feathers. And Susanne stood looking over the russet fields that the winter had laid waste and spring was repairing with a sort of rosy breath in reddening rose-stems and greening willows, and wondered what ailed her that she seemed to have no will, no wish, — to be beside herself. She moved from day to night in a cloud, and lay from night to day in a blank of consciousness. Only when she was with the old aunts was she able to play the part that let them think her unconcerned.

One day, in passing, it chanced that she looked

in the glass. She had looked without seeing, before. Was it herself? Was it an apparition? Was it only two great eyes gazing out of a cloud? "It is shameless!" she said. "To have come to that for the sake of a man who — who has forgot I am alive! Selfish wretch, I am! I 'll make that gown if it kills me!" But it was too late.

"The waters, the waters of Meribah!" sighed the old chorus. "Oh, we have all drunk of them!"

"They 've got lights in 'most every winder down ter the Mayhews'," said Miss Ann, one night. "It 's tew bad you could n't git her gownd fixed, Susanne. As long as you set out."

"I wisht Cap'n Symon could hev made out ter live a week longer," said Miss Celia. "But 's I told Mis' Mayhew, a widder 's gotter hev her mournin' jest 's much 's a bride. I was down ter help set out the supper table. I thought 't would show there war n't no feelin'. Rony 'd b'en cryin'. Her mother said ef it hed b'en daytime she would n't 'a' minded so much; but ter be merried in a travelin' gownd in the night-time did look so poverty-struck. They 're goin's fur as Buffalo."

"Wal, we 'd better be gittin' on our thin's, sister," said the other. "I guess I 'll wear the vandykes 'ith the darnin' needle stitch. You goin' ter wear your cap 'ith purple ribbins?"

"No, I ain't," said Miss Ann, rather shortly.

"Every old woman in the parish wears purple. I put pink ones on a-purpose. You ain't comin', Susanne? P'raps 't would look better ef you did. I do' know, though. I do' know 's I would ef I was you."

Susanne went upstairs, and opened her window on the soft night of early spring. "I 'll jest stifle!" she said. The stars, the stars of Don's wedding night, hung mistily silver in the purple sky. The smell of the upturned furrows lay fresh on the damp air. The lights were blazing in the Mayhew house, and in the old Davison house on the knoll, — Don's wedding lights! Suddenly she turned, her heart beating in her finger-tips, her eyes shining in the dark. This was what had possessed her! This was what she had been waiting for! This — far back in her unread, unspoken intention — was what had hindered her! She must have meant to do it all the time, but had not said so to herself! Whether that was true or not, she ran now to the armoire and its deep drawer; she lifted over her level arms the long, lovely muslins and the veil, adjusting them quickly and lightly; she ran, as if evil powers were after her to interfere, down the stairs, outdoors, no matter about the latch, into the dark, and along the road to the Mayhews', swift and soundless and white as a ghost in the night, in at the back door, and up to Rowena's room, some one telling her the way.

"Make haste!" she exclaimed breathlessly to

Rowena. "It 's here! Lemme put it on you. Another white skirt. There. There. Gimme a pin. No, a big one. There. I see. Yes. It 's jest right. Guess it can be ketched over there, though. That 's good. A trifle long — not much, though, ef you stan' straight. Look in the glass! Now. I 'll fix the veil. I 'll shower it all round you. There! You look like a sperrit. You look the way you wantter look — all white an' sweet an' solum!"

"Oh, Susanne!" cried Rowena, shaking with excitement and joy. "You 've taken my breath away! And you was meanin' this all the time!"

"I guess so," said Susanne. "And I 'm real glad you 're goin' to make Don happy. Oh, Rony, you 'll try an' make him happy? And I hope you 'll be happy, too. I 'm givin' you the fust kiss in your weddin' gownd. Gownd an' kiss are my present!" And then Susanne ran away as she had come, catching sight through an open door of the start the old aunts gave as they saw her.

Perhaps, at the vision of his bride wrapped about in all that vaporous whiteness, Don Davison remembered the vision of Susanne with the snowy films floating about her. But it is to be doubted. Only Miss Ann and Miss Celia looked at each other with great eyes. "You was mistook, Cely," said Miss Ann, as they walked home together in the starlight. "Susanne 's goin' ter grow old like us. But it 's jest 's you say about happiness, — w'en your own 's

dead an' gone you must git your sheer out 'n the happiness of others."

"Susanne looked reel happy, reel bright an' happy, w'en I ketched sight of her comin' downstairs there, Ann."

"Jes' so."

"Wal! I think a woman'd orter be translated thet 's happy givin' another woman her weddin' gownd!"

"Susanne *is* translated."

"Ann, a cross is a cross your life long."

"Cely," said her sister, "you 've heern Elder Perry say thet there ain't no cross w'en there ain't no self to suffer under it!"

MISS MAHALA'S WILL

XII

Miss Mahala's Will

IT had never occurred to the Settlement that anything could happen to Miss Mahala. She had always been there; and naturally she always would be there, like the farm lands, and the woods.

It was somewhat as if the earth had moved from its center then when a rumor went about that Miss Mahala had been making her will, — a rumor due to the ears of Sally Moss, which were wont to catch at a half-truth; and a half-truth, as Miss Mahala said in forcible Doric, is often a lie.

What in the world, asked one and another, was she making a will about? Sally Moss gladly told them; she was making her will to arrange for a provision for her cat. And then the peaceful Settlement was in an uproar.

"You see," Miss Mahala said to the Elder, whom she had asked to prepare the paper for her, "life 's like yisterday, here to-day an' gone tomorrer. An' ef I sink in a bog-hole w'en I 'm out geth'rin' my yarbs, or ef I don't wake up some mornin', there 's nobody but Pharaoh to care — "

"Why, Miss Mahala! "

"Oh, you 'd hev regrets, mebbe; but 't would break Pharaoh's heart. So I 'll pervide fer Pharaoh

w'ile I can." And she complacently regarded her cat sleek and shining in the red sunbeam that fell through the boursaulte rose that climbed the window.

"Miss Mahala! Pharaoh! A cat!"

"Pharaoh is a person, Elder Perry," said Miss Mahala solemnly. "W'en I come home at night who is there to welcome me but Pharaoh, with his little glad cry? W'en I wake up mornin's, whose great eyes open an' shet 'ith happiness but Pharaoh's? Who sets 'ith me all day long in stormy weather, and every onct in a w'ile looks in my eyes, much as to say, 'Don't be lonesome, I'm here'? Who, w'en he 's b'en prowlin' in the woods, brings home pervisions fer the fam'bly 'ith a field-mouse 'twixt his teeth, an' lays it down afore me," twisting her finger through a thin gray curl in which still were threads of black. "Elder, who, w'en I 've b'en kneelin' beside my bed, an' mebbe cryin', gits up to t' other side an' brushes the tears from my eyes?"

"Switchin' his tail about, I s'pose."

"No, Elder Perry. W'en he knows I 'm distressed. There 's folks likes me; an' folks that puts up 'ith me; but Pharaoh, he loves me. An' I 'm goin' ter fix thin's so 't Pharaoh shell allus hev his kind word, an' his bit o' meat, his cream, an' squash an' sparrergrass, an' catnip, an' his cushing. And I 'll leave suthin' ter Posy fer seein' to him. He 's old now, my poor Pharaoh. We 've growed old tergether. I 'll fix 't so 't he shan't be hurried out o' life fer the sake

o' the money, by leavin' that bit o' money w'en he 's done 'ith 't, ter help pay the naytional debt. An' that makes Pharaoh safe."

"Why not leave it to the parish ultimately, for the needs of the meeting-house, Miss Mahala?"

"The perrish? The meetin'-us? W'ile Deacon Harding an' Cy Thomas are a-managin' there poor Pharaoh's life would n't be wuth a continental copper. No, Elder, I shell make pervision fer Pharaoh the fust words o' my last will and testyment. I, Mahaly, bein' o' soun' mind, ef not so soun' body, do hereby will and devise — I don't exactly know the proper quantity o' words — you fix it up fer me, Elder."

"But a little chloroform — "

"That 's jest it! Them vivisectarians is allus seekin' their prey. They may be all right fer your cat, but they ain't for mine. W'en I think o' Pharaoh's great sufferin' eyes — chloryform or no chloryform — w'y I 'd rise in my grave!"

"Well, well. And what next?"

"Suthin' fer you an' Mis' Perry."

"That won't do, Miss Mahala. No, no!"

"It 's gotta du!"

"No, I assure you, my kind friend, really I can't draw up any paper in which I — "

"Now, Elder Perry, have some common sense! You 've got lots of oncommon. You ain't a right — "

"I will do no such questionable thing!" And

the Elder leaned back with his arms stoutly folded across his worn waistcoat, and the sky shining blue in his eyes.

"It 's a pity," said Miss Mahala, rising to find her knitting, "ef I can't leave my old Bible an' w'at 's in it to them I care for! I suppose you 'd take that?" with a triumphant smile.

"I know very well what is in it," said the Elder. "A dollar bill between every other leaf."

"Who told you?"

"Sally Moss."

"How 'd she know! W'en Sally Moss dries up an' blows away, folks can think 'thout bein' waylaid. But that ain't here nor there. You 'll be executioner, it 's all tied up 'ith stout string, — an' you 'll jes' take it an' nobody 'll know."

"I 'll know. An' Miss Mahala, it is n't safe to keep that book in the house."

"Think a thief 'd be lookin' fer a Bible? But any ways, I ain't goin' ter give a copper to the heathen, and ef that makes a scandal I 'll be a considerable distance off where scandal won't trouble me. But let 's go on. Now there 's my money that 's a-growin' down in the Bank ter Salt Water." Miss Mahala paused. "Elder," she began again presently, and then she was silent as if unwilling or unable to say more.

"I do' know," she exclaimed, after a long sigh. "I do' know. There 's some thin's I ain't never spoke of. But I s'pose you gotter know. Ef I can git ter speakin'

plain, you 'll unnerstan' an' help. It 's betwixt you an' me, Elder. 'T ain't much use t' ask merried folks not to tell thin's to each other. So I misdoubt ef 't ain't a good plan fer ministers ter stay single. Not," she added quickly, "that I 'd hev you an' Mis' Perry any other ways 'n w'at ye be."

Miss Mahala was quiet then so long, looking into the little garden where her transplanted herbs were shedding their pungency after a passing shower, that the Elder said, "Well?"

"'T ain't easy," she answered. "'T ain't flatterin'. But fact is w'en I was young I teached schule here. Them that give me the job did n't know as much as me. An' ef I don't make my parts o' speech come together right I teached the rules an' hed the boys and gels du it. But there 's a sight o' larnin' that ain't in books. They knowed as well as me that w'en the cuckoo calls it means rain. But they did n't know the fac's about Bonaparty, nor how to calkilate interes', and I did. I hed the book and I hed the key. Wal, amongst the boys was one called Jerry Dow. Them boys, an' the gels tew, useter pick upon Jerry. He took it patient; but it cut deep. An so I hed ter keep the bigger fellers off. They was all older 'n me. There was one o' them big fellers meanin' ter merry me w'en schule 'd be over; and I was half willin'. I was young, ye see, an' sort o' good lookin'. Ye 'd never know these eyes was mine ef ye 'd seen 'em then. Yes, they 've shed tears enough

ter wash the color out'n 'em. See w'at a old simpleton I be!" she said, with something like a tear in her eyes now. "Not that it ain't all dead an' gone years back; but I 'm sorry fer the young thin' I was. However! As I was sayin', Jerry, he took to me, grateful like, an' he'd bring me pink swamp-honeysuckle in its season, an' strawberries braided on straws, an' bimeby pond-lilies. I mind one Sabbath, afore we hed the big bell in the meetin'-'us, every one loiterin' roun' the grave-yard was called by a hand-bell, an' Jerry done it. 'W'y don't ye leave off?' some one ses. 'Elder 's come.' An' Jerry ses, 'I don't keer ef he has. Miss Mahala ain't.' An' the big boys, they called him Mahaly's pet, an' Miss Nancy, an' Dolly Dow. An', of course, I hed ter take his side — I never could bear to see a worm trod on. An' bimeby I see he warn't so much of a worm as some. He was allus dreamin' — one o' them that plants dates an' expec's palm-leaf fans ter come up, an' gits rich on the idee of a hot spell and a market for the fans. But you 'd orter seen him tend out on his mother. She was a rag-doll sort o' critter; but my heart, she hed vim. She 'd rout him up in the dead dark o' the night to recite Myra Means's piece of po'try till she got ter sleep. An' he liked ter du it. He was kind all thru, and single-minded, ye see. Wal, one time, long about last term, the snow was a-flyin', an' the big boys was snow-ballin' and enj'yin' havin' the gels see how smart they was.

Didn't ye ever see a woodcock show off to his hen? It 's all human natur'. I was jes' callin' of 'em in w'en Jerry come runnin' down. 'W'at ye late for, Sissy?' they called. 'Course he would n't tell 'em he 'd stayed ter wash up his mother's floor for her. An' they begun peltin' him 'ith their snow-balls. 'Take that, bub!' one sings out. 'An' that, beauty!' another calls. An' the balls was flyin' like feathers. 'Here 's for you, goo-goo!' one on 'em shouted. 'W'y don't ye fire back? Ain't yer fingers light enough?' Now Mis' Dow she had a nevew come to her w'en he was a baby, before ever Jerry was born; an' she set a sight by him, more 'n she did by Jerry w'n he come. An' w'ile Jerry was a-growin' up he jes' worshiped Frarney, an' worshiped his mother, too. W'at she said, went. An' w'en, as time passed, Frarney got some money that did n't belong to him, an' throwed the blame on Jerry, Jerry never budged, but took the blame, an' his mother thinks to this day he done it. He 'd 'a' gone thru fire for her, an' I guess he did. Frarney 's a-gittin' his come-uppance now — I hope. So ye see w'at that cry about light fingers meant to Jerry. An' as he run he stumbled an' fell, an' then he cowered right down an' the snow-balls was a cloud round him. An' that was more 'n I could stan'. I run out, jest 's I was, an' I ses, 'You stop that, Cy Thomas! Ain't ye 'shamed!' For it was Cy Thomas hed sung out about the light fingers. 'Jerry Dow ain't no more light-fingered 'n you be!'

I ses. 'I know all about it!' ses I. 'An' Cy Thomas, you go right to the black-board an' work out the cube-root o' that ball o' butter!' ses I. 'Wal,' ses Cy. An' that was the end on't 'twixt Cy an' me. Arter a time he merried a gel from Salt Water; folks said she knowed French, but she did n't know a rule o' grammar. I ain't heard o' much French there, but she teached him to walk Spanish. Them little thin's du. He takes it out on the neighbors, now. But I had n't helped Jerry none, sidin' 'ith him so. The way them fellers an' gigglin' gels went fer him made my blood run cold. An' Jerry never struck back. Felt 't was his part and lot. An' wunst, w'en Cy Thomas got caught in the swamp an' was a-roarin' fer help, Jerry waded out with boards an' fetched him safe. I 'm boun' ter say Cy left off a-persecutin'. But 't was late in the day when Jerry 'd' lef' schule. O' course by this time I was makin' Jerry's cause my cause. They got a man to take the place nex' year an I took 'to dodderin' round in the woods an' ways about my yarbs; an' often as not he was with me. Poor Jerry! An' the long an' the short of it is I promised Jerry I 'd be wife to him — some day. I kind o' felt as if he needed my protection and I needed his patience, an' I see suthin' dretfle high an' sweet in him by rights — the way he said his prayers, the way he tended out on that mother o' his'n, the way he sent his thoughts up nights w'en we was a-settin' on the door-step, makin' out that Heaven was some-

wheers in where the Milky Way divides, the dark way windin' into it, the unbelievable glory w'en ye git there. Ever think on't, Elder? We did n't say nothin' erbout our arrangements, fer I was n't goin' ter live on the hill 'ith Mis' Dow, an' he warn't goin' ter leave his mother, an' so we was jest a-hangin' by the gills w'en Jerry — poor Jerry — he see Eunice. He 'd seed Eunice every day o' his life fer years; but all to oncet it seemed as ef he 'd never seed her afore. She ris up an' blotted out the sun an' moon an' seven stars an me. I do' know how she done it. He was open. He telled me he was sorry he 'd ever kissed me. I was n't. You would n't think it, ter see him a-shufflin' roun' now, the most onlikelies' thin' in the Settlement — but I 'd come ter set my eyes by him then. Wal, it 's over an' done with. But they was lonely evenin's on the door-step. I did n't send any thoughts heavenwards; there warn't no heaven for me. They was lonely nights, 'ith the rustle o' leaves like the rushin' o' rain, so dark ye felt it never would be light. Did n't seem wuth w'ile ter live; an' w'en I slep' I wisht I 'd never wake. Did n't seem as ef I could bear it. Soon 's I could I went to visit 'ith my uncle, down ter Salt Water; an' the new sights an' soun's sort o' changed my poles. W'en I come back ye would n't 'a' guessed anythin' 'd happened. But it made me bitter."

"Nothing could do that, Miss Mahala."

"Think so? Sweetes' apples makes the sharpes'

vinegar. Wal, by that time little Eunice was born — sweet child — an' old Mis' Dow was dead. And Eunice herself was as like Mis' Dow as two peas in a pod. Ef Jerry sensed that, he never put two an' two tergether. One and one was enough fer him. An' he was a-putterin' about, graftin' old damask roses on wild plum-bushes, an' a-tryin' ter git blue ones — and it 'll be a blue moon fust — and a-makin' asmy medicines out 'n mother mulleins, and a-findin' new ways ter du square root. An' his house looks like rideout; an' sometimes dinner 's ready an' sometimes 't ain't; an' sometimes there ain't any, anyways. She 's sickly. But he 's happy. He ain't the fust man ter warm his feet in the moonshine." And Miss Mahala polished her knitting needle in her hair till she forgot what she was doing. "Now ef I leave this money outright to Jerry," she began again.

"To Jerry!"

"Yes, to Jerry. Then he 's jest as like as not to kindle the fire 'ith a handful o' bank bills, or make a spill ter light the lamp 'ith one o' them, or be a-shreddin' of 'em up ter find the secret o' the sort o' paper, or lose it all in his wool-geth'rin', or suthin'! His dreams don't fit into the care o' money. An' so ef I leave it ter you — besides w'at 's yourn, ye know" — with a twinkle — "you can dole it out ter him an' he not dream where it comes from. Only I 'm boun' the Settlement shan't know, eyther."

"Miss Mahala," began the Elder, "I understand your feeling —"

"It 's more 'n I du," said Miss Mahala grimly. "I don't care one soumarkee for Jerry Dow. But somehow I want him to be comf'ble, an' his folks arter him. Little Eunice was a dear. She come ter see me often. I hed sweet-flag fer her, an' checkerberries, an' black birch stems 'ith spicy bark; an' she useter like ter see the birds perch on my han'. But Eunice put a stop to her comin'."

Miss Mahala was silent now, gazing wistfully at nothing. It was not worth while to tell the Elder of many a silver dollar Jerry Dow had found in his furrow, and had taken as part of a Kidd treasure and set himself to digging for others, sometimes then finding a couple of gold pieces, which occasioned work all over the place, greatly to the crop's benefit.

The Elder put up his ink-horn, and looked through the open door where Pharaoh sat, demure as if he did n't know a will was being drawn in his favor while he blinked in the sun. "But when Jerry has followed you?" said the Elder.

"Follered me? Oh! There 's his darter, Eunie, that 's merried ter Ruel. All I got would 'a' ben Jerry's, an' 't wan't me that went back on the unnerstan'in'. And so that 's the nateral way."

"Very well," said the Elder, rising and going to the door, "except the provision for the cat."

"You don't like cats, Elder. Some don't. You

ain't ever experienced how companionable a cat can be. Seems ter me p'r'aps they be some superior to human bein's, 'cordin' to. They know a lot they don't tell."

"But it is unusual," said the Elder, "to mention a cat in so serious a document —"

"Pharaoh 's unushul," said Miss Mahala, following him. "An' he 's goin' ter be pervided for the way unushul folks gener'ly be."

The Elder was gazing into the depth of the greenwood that for a life-time had swung its shadows round Miss Mahala's house, and thinking of her lonesome years.

"You tryin' ter make that Jerry an' this Jerry fit tergether," she said. "Wal, ye can't an' I can't eyther. But there 't is."

On the edge of the wood a slight figure was flitting along, like a leaf blown on a wind. "Enough ter make ye believe in witches, that little woods critter," said Miss Mahala. "Sally Moss. She 's b'en unner the winder, I calkerlate. Not jest a-puppus ter listen — come ter borry. Heered me, a-praisin' Pharaoh, I guess, enough ter see her travelin' 'ith talk. Takes all sorts ter make a world."

"I never!" exclaimed Kitty McGregor, when Sally had recovered coherence. "A cat! W'y! It 's blaspheemous. An' the meetin'-'us 'ith no carpet!" And Kitty hung up her broom so angrily that she broke the string. "A fort'n to a cat!"

"I did n't say 't was so much as that," said Sally Moss. "A pervision. I did n't hear the hull on 't — Elder sort o' sheerin' off. I was goin' ter borry some pack-thread fer my mats — p'r'aps you've got some, — but I considered I 'd better come away afore Mahaly ketched me an' made me swear ter say nothin' ter block the wheels o' progress."

"I 'll block 'em!" cried Mrs. Kitty McGregor. "I 'll put a spoke in them wheels! Don't that child play lovely on grandsir's fiddle?"

Miss Mahala, when she went to the door that night, did not see a struggling furry creature with eyes like live coals, in the arms of a shadow that made off through the forest. "And I a-hatin' cats so!" said Kitty McGregor as she ran, muffling her prey in her shawl.

"Pharaoh!" called Mrs. Mahala. "Pharaoh — raoh — oh, oh!" But unless a far and feeble cry across the smothering woods was a reply, there came no sign. "Kitty, kitty, kitty!" she called again. "Busy, ketchin' a chipmunk," she said. "Wal, he can come in through the cat-hole."

But in the morning there was no warm cushion on Miss Mahala's feet, no great soft eyes waiting for hers to open. All day no Pharaoh. The next day she was much cast down. She put out little dishes of his luxuries. The squirrels came and emptied them. She called him in endearing tones. She sought him in the woods, her apron over her arm, as if she re-

membered the story of her Aunt Bashy looking through the forest for the bones of her lost babies. "He 's all I got in the world," she murmured. A song-sparrow flirted his feathers and poured out a gush of melody, and a cat-bird mocked her with Pharaoh's voice as she went. Little furry things skimmed across her path; but none of them was Pharaoh.

The tears ran down her old sun-tanned cheeks, as she sat on her door-step at night. "He 's been friend an' companion, an' he loves me," she exclaimed. "The only created thin' that does. He 's caught somewheers an' is sufferin'. Pharaoh — raoh — oh, oh!" she called like a clarion, and listened for some response faint and far away, and wept bitterly when none came. It was not altogether for Pharaoh; it was for all that he represented of friends and family, the life of long ago and the desert of to-day.

She was worn and worried when a week had passed without Pharaoh. "There 's more in the house 'n I want now," she said to the gaunt Martha, who had happened in with some cheese-cakes. "What 's set folks out?"

"You du look peaked, Mahaly. An' ye b'en makin' yer will, an' —"

"Cat's tail, Marthy! Fact is, I ain't been eatin'. That makes anybuddy slim."

"W'y ain't ye b'en eatin'?"

"I do' kno'. Don't seem ter relish. I've lost Pharaoh," said Miss Mahala slowly.

"Lost who?"

"Pharaoh. My cat."

"You out o' yer head, Mahaly?

"I wisht I was."

"Mahaly, you makin' this fuss about a cat? It 's puffeckly ludicurious."

"About Pharaoh. Pharaoh was more 'n a cat."

"W'y, you ain't swep' yer floor!"

"Marthy, I don't keer whether schule keeps or not. I 'm dredfle lonesome."

Martha stared in grim want of comprehension.

"You got the Deacon, Marthy, an' Ruel, an' Eunie an' all. I got Pharaoh. Leastways I hed him, an' he was all I hed. He went in the garding an' the woods 'ith me; slep' 'ith me. An' I do' know ef he 's caught in some trap, an' a-wonderin' w'y I 've forsook him, or ef he 's dead, or ef he 's stole—"

"Who 'd steal an old cat?"

"You ain't a mite comfortin', Marthy."

"I hed n't dreamt ye was so wantin', Mahala. A cat!"

"Looks as ef rain was comin'. I guess you 'd better be goin' erlong, Marthy," said Miss Mahala.

But Martha came down to the edge of the woods that night, and heard Miss Mahala callin' "Pharaoh — raoh — oh, oh!" like some lonely bird. "I declare for 't," said Martha. "I don't unnerstan' it. But it 'most makes me cry myself."

On the way home she met Kitty McGregor; and she told Kitty about it, and took her back along the wood-path to hear the cry herself. "I do' know," said Martha, "ef it 's jes' foolish, or jes' techin'. Ye don't suppose her mind 's give out, do ye? Livin' so all sole alone?" But Kitty hastened home to Seth and young Kitty and the fiddle. If the loss of Pharaoh would divert Miss Mahala's money to the use of the meeting-house, getting Pharaoh out of the way was good missionary work.

The bell she had helped buy called Miss Mahala to meeting. She had usually shut Pharaoh into the bedroom on Sundays, lest he followed her. If he could only follow her now! She sat in the brown shadows of the dusky little sanctuary, her best garments giving her no satisfaction — the shining, if rusty, alpaca, the Paisley shawl, the bonnet with its wrought veil half hiding her woebegone countenance, which had always afforded her a superior pleasure. She felt as if the higher powers had deserted her. "About a cat!" thought more than one. But the Elder knew the cat's loss had only accented the loneliness and bitterness of her life.

The altar sparkled with its snowy cloth and bright vessels in the dim space. She herself had given the service; it was pewter; but it shone like the high-priest's breastplate. Her face brightened; it brought new thoughts. But after the benediction she stalked out without speaking.

Posy Jones lingered on the steps. She remembered the time when Miss Mahala brought Pharaoh and came to live with her and Peter and board out an old debt. Miss Mahala had n't cared about the debt; but she knew that Posy and Peter had come to blows, as you may say, and were thinking of divorce — and there 'd never been a divorce in the Settlement — and she considered her being there would make them each do about right to show her 't was n't *their* fault. And it did; and they were so peaceable that they fell in love with each other again. And then Miss Mahala went home with Pharaoh through the woods in the moonlight, Pharaoh having gone home to see if things were right there every day of his stay. She missed Pharaoh herself after they went.

"It 's no use talkin'," she exclaimed. "Miss Mahala's cat was folks to her. She's afflicted. This perrish ain't nuthin' better ter du then ter turn out an' hunt fer Pharaoh!"

"That 's right," said Mr. Cy Thomas. "Miss Mahala 's b'en the savin' grace o' this community. Ef she 's in trouble, it 's us to help her out, Sabbath or no Sabbath! What say, Elder?"

"Who 'll join me in the search?" said the Elder. And wood and field were scoured that nooning; but without avail.

It was later, on the night of that day, that a dark shape again ran through the woods, wearing a bulging and struggling shawl. And when Miss Mahala

went to the door for her hopeless good-night call, Pharaoh came purring round her feet.

"I 'm glad I had n't drownded him," said Kitty McGregor to herself, quite ready to cry as she ran.

"I feel as if the Lord hed forgive me," said Miss Mahala, while she held Pharaoh much closer than Pharaoh liked to be held. "Though I reely don't know what for!"

A knot of men, on their way to the mowing, some mornings later, were passing the garden where the Elder stood among his wife's ascension lilies.

"Yes," said the Elder. "Pharaoh turned up all right, lucky cat! Yes, it 's true, Mr. Thomas, Miss Mahala — it 's no secret — among other bequests gives a good sum to the parish. But she has provided Pharaoh with a maintenance for life out of the fund."

"Wisht I was Pharaoh!" said Jerry Dow, as he shuffled along.

A LIFE IN A NIGHT

XIII

A Life in a Night

HOW many an evening had Miss Mahala sat on her doorstep, as now, with her varying thoughts, looking at the sunset without seeing it! By rights, Pharaoh should have been on the gate-post, the ruddy rays burnishing his blackness, aloof and impassive, but turning now and then a wary eye in her direction. But Pharaoh rested in a far corner, with a bed of catnip on his little grave; and because of Miss Mahala's absolute need of something to love she was companioned now by a yellow cur that she had picked up, sick and sorry, by the wayside, and by some accident of speech to which he had answered, had called Zip, who was never able sufficiently to express his devotion with his brown, beseeching eyes and his stumpy tail.

"A mongrel," the Elder had said. "But then a mongrel holds all dog-dom, you know."

Zip was looking at her now, wistfully, as if imploring her to tell him the desire of her heart that he might help her to it. Every now and then he gave a short yelp, and sprang about a moment, and then returned to the tranquil sympathy and loving look.

But Miss Mahala could not have told Zip the desire of her heart. She could not have told herself.

She was thinking of old days, a thing she seldom allowed herself to do. Sometimes she would suddenly come upon a recollection, as one opens a book upon a pressed rose, meeting a sweet and surprising fragrance, even although with a sense of the dust of death; but not when it was concerning Jerry — Jerry Dow. She was remembering the morning long ago, when, at first with difficulty and then with a rush of words, she had told the Elder, who was making her will, the tragedy of her poor life; remembering the days when Jerry came to her for sympathy and for her respect for the manhood in him — the slouching, shifty creature, with no more force than an oyster. He had leaned on her, looked up to her, was something to be helped. And beginning with pity that grew intense, she had ended with an affection equally intense, and with a certain delicacy of love which was unconsciously a recognition of the fact that his inaptness demanded a great tenderness.

How many a morning had they tramped the woods and swamps for the roots and herbs from which she had begun to make her livelihood. All the sheen of the dew-wet thickets, all the sparkles of the plashy pools, all the brilliance of leaf and petal, seemed to surround Jerry so that they became, as it were, a part of him. She suspected that to many another he was neither manly nor noble in appearance, but she saw, or thought she did, his soul shining through his face so clearly that to her he had become beautiful.

The time he killed the big black snake that was charming a bird, the time he drove off the wildcat that had strayed down from the great forests, the time he took Deacon Asher's bull by the horns while she fled for the fence — in those times he seemed manly enough. The evening of the day he killed the snake they had heard a waking bird pour forth a moment's bubbling music. "The snake," Jerry said, "would have spelled that little bird."

"It was like an evil sperrit follerin' a white soul," said Miss Mahala.

"That music that 's shet up in 'em is allers a mystery ter me; all that singin' and gladness in that pinch o' feathers," he said. "It 's a mericle."

How many an evening they had sat on this door-stone, spelling out the constellations and weaving their fancies from star to star. He had such rare and strange fancies, she thought, as he talked of the journeys they would one day make among those stars, floating together through space. "P'raps we shall meet a troop of angels on the way," he said. "You 're a'most an angel now, Mahaly. Elder ses angels on'y means messengers, an' you 've be'n a messenger of God to me, Mahaly. Mahaly — it 's a lovely name, jest a-breathin'."

And at another time, "'T ain't in reason ter s'pose them stars goes on and on an' comes out on nothin'," he would say. "P'r'aps w'en they du stop 't will be right up agin the great white throne."

And Miss Mahala met his imaginings so that she was a constant stimulus to him.

Sitting there now in the twilight gloom, with the breath of the wild roses about her and the stars slowly sifting out of the purple, remembrance came of Jerry pottering with the wild-flowers when he should have been up the hill hoeing his mother's corn. But Jerry was outside of material things; he must be left free for his search into the secrets of nature, whether of the spiritual or of the earthy. Once he was shaking the pollen-dust of a late apple blossom into the heart of a wild rose. "The outside of a rose-hip is sweet 's a St. Michael's pear," he said.

"What there is of it," she assented.

"An' now, ef this takes, we 'll hev rose-hips the size of apples," he declared. And when he was experimenting again with an evening primrose and a white mallow, "'T ain't thet I wanter change the evenin' primrose," he explained. "There ain't a sweeter flower blows fer its pale yaller and its smell and all. But I wanter see how God felt w'en he made a new flower."

It was no surprise to her, when, in later years, he was said to have found a new way of manipulating numbers. She remembered that numbers had always interested him, he proved his sums on the blackboard by "casting out the nines."

"There 's power in that number," he said. "It 's

a mystery. It 's mebbe got sunthin' ter du 'ith religion. Three times three is nine, an' w'en ye 've got nine ye can't never gid rid on it. Nine times two is eighteen, an' eight an' one is nine, an' nine times three is twenty-seven — 't is, ain't it? — an' two an' seven makes nine. An' so on up to billions. You could do sunthin' 'ith nine ef ye on'y knowed how. It must 'a' be'n used somehow w'en the world an' the worlds was set a-goin'."

But more often than not the two sat side by side in the soft dusk, saying nothing, each feeling the other's presence as if at one with the universe. Sometimes it almost seemed then to Miss Mahala in the summer dark and the murmur of the forest that she heard the answering voice of the great sweet earth, and the call of space to the movement of the stars.

Jerry usually went to meeting with her. "I love Sunday," he said. "It 's allers a great stillness. Seems 's ef the birds themselves knowed 't was Sunday."

"*I 'm* allers expectin' sunthin' new ter happen Mondays," she replied.

But it was on Sunday, instead, that something new happened. For suddenly there was Eunice.

Eunice had been born and bred in the Settlement. She had been seen in meeting Sundays, and, being a light thistle-down sort of thing, almost everywhere else on other days. Slightly pretty, trifling, helpless, there was no reason why any one should fall in love

with her. But the electric touch of love comes like a finger out of heaven, unforeseen, undreamed. It touched Jerry with a sudden sweet fire one day and left him breathless, bewildered, and full of a wild joy he had never known before.

When Jerry failed his tryst that night Miss Mahala wondered, with a vague uneasiness. But on a week of absence she went from wonder to dismay, and paced the path, up and down, unreasoning, from dark till dawn; and then sank to a passive dullness that dimly recognized the truth, while she took up her usual tasks.

One day, then, in broad daylight, Jerry came back. She was sorting an apronful of balm. To her dying day that pleasant pungent odor of balm gave her a pang. He stood with his hat on the back of his head, and his hands in his pockets. "Mahaly," he said, "I shan't never fergit ye, nor w'at an' all ye 've be'n ter me. Ef a man could hev two wives — "

"But he can't," said Miss Mahala.

"An' — an' — there 's Eunice," he said.

"I see," said Miss Mahala.

For an instant all was black, and a great wind was singing in her ears. Yet this would never do; — the dint her finger-nails made in her palms was there long after nightfall.

"I 'm glad ye du, Mahaly," he said. "You allers was senserble. An' she 's so gentle-like an' sweet. She 's awfle pretty, ain't she, Mahaly? "

"Awfle," said Miss Mahala; and she heard her voice like the echo of a hollow rumble on the air.

"Jesso. I do' know where my eyes hes be'n. She 's powerfle pretty — an' good besides. An' then it 's all off betwixt you an' me, an' no harm done?"

"All off," she said, as well as her dry lips would allow.

"An' ye don't feel ter be sorry, or hold hardness, do ye?"

She shook her head with a dreary smile, her face ghastly. But Jerry saw nothing. The thought of Eunice's rose-color bloom so filled his eye that all was rose-color.

If Miss Mahala could have screamed, one sharp, explosive scream — But she felt as if she were dead. It was like the voice of a disembodied spirit, to her perception, that she heard one saying, far off and thin, "The Lord bless ye, Jerry. An' Eunice, too. An' w'en ye want a bed o' balm, come down here an' git the seed. Ye 've on'y gotter ast." And she rose, as a queen might end an interview; and Jerry disappeared into the piece of woods, going up the hill beyond with a foot as light as his heart. And she knew how the ashes of a great fire drowned and drenched might feel.

Miss Mahala, afterwards, when the tumult had subsided and grief had done its work, never felt ashamed of her experience. On the contrary, she was glad to recall how proud and straight Jerry stood as he spoke, with no stammering or faltering.

Poor Jerry — he never stood proud and straight again!

With Eunice to wife, all Jerry's finer dreams and fancies died away. He still played with flower-seeds and did something with wild apples on the road to Salt Water. But marvelings and speculatings and poesies left him. He had no one to listen to them or care for them. He fell into dull silence, and presently forgot them.

"She ain't percisely feeble-minded," Miss Mahala thought when she could think at all. "But she ain't all there. She'll pull him down. Poor boy, poor Jerry!"

And Eunice did pull him down. Unconsciously she did not want him to live on any other level than her own. Year by year he grew more limp, more shriveled in his soul, less alive even in his body. "As wuthless as Jerry Dow," the younger Settlement used to say.

It was not only her own loss that distressed Miss Mahala. In the enclosed garden of the narrow Settlement she had found in Jerry and his dreams a satisfaction for her hunger for the poetic and the fantastic. That was over. Now it was the pain of seeing Jerry's increasing degeneracy. But when time had deadened sensation her mind took on an attitude of waiting; and except for occasion she came finally to a placid forgetfulness. Nothing was lost, but all was overgrown.

Before this tranquillity she had a degree of comfort in little Euny, whom she lured with checkerberries, and beechnuts, and the spicy tang of curly yellow red-cedar buds. Eunice, however, put an end to that. And then she saw but little of the child until Euny was grown and had married Reuel Asher, and sometimes ran through the woods for a pinch of sweet herbs, or a dose of the various cordials that Miss Mahala's little still helped her to compound, and which it was her delight to use on any sufferer in the Settlement, where she divided medical honors with the Elder.

She was recalling those happy and unhappy days, as it chanced, feeling solitary and forsaken but for Zip's guardian care. She had heard, that day, of Jerry's illness, and Sally Moss had misdoubted her if he would ever gather sprawl enough to rise from the bed. Reuel had had a doctor up from Salt Water, who had n't thought it likely.

Suddenly Zip gave a short bark and sprang up in a gay excitement. And then a clear voice was calling with an accent of distress, and Euny came running through the wood. "Oh, Miss Mahaly, Miss Mahaly!" she cried. "Pa 's awfle low, an' ma 's off somewheres down ter Salt Water ter see a meejum about him — pa useter say he 'd half a mind ter, himself, sometimes w'en there was a blight threatenin' the corn. I do' know w'at ter du! He 's goin' ter die! Oh, I know he 's goin' ter die!" she

exclaimed, wringing her hands. "Can't you come up an' bring some o' yer filterin's an' help him? An' oh, Miss Mahala, I du love pa! He 's never hed half a chanst. An' he 's allers be'n good ter me — poor pa dear — " sobbing into her apron.

Miss Mahala was at the cupboard where her treasures kept their potencies in the dark, before Euny finished. She lighted her tallow dip, and looked here and looked there, taking up this a moment, putting it down and taking up that. "Here we are," she said directly. "Ye 're all short o' breath, child. That 's bad. Now you go slow. I 'll rise the hill in no time at all. P'r'aps — anyway, I may make dyin' easy. You stay there, Zip. No, you stay there!" And she was off, Euny vainly following. And Zip, with downcast tail and a little questioning defiance in his eye, held the open door.

If Miss Mahala did not expect success, nevertheless she threw down a bold challenge to fate. It was a hard fight she had in those dark hours. And she came off beaten.

As, after her bitter experience, Miss Mahala walked through the piece of woods that separated her place from the rest of the Settlement, she found herself strangely divided between a deep depression and a certain happiness.

In the middle of the wood, where it was yet very dark and of a deadly stillness, trouble weighed upon

her. The world seemed full of sorrow. She wondered why people rejoiced when one was born into this suffering, with death at the end. She forgot that the Elder had once said that death was the archway through which one looked out upon infinite life. She did not articulate her disordered thoughts; but they were part of a subconsciousness of misery. The tears rolled down her thin brown cheeks as she walked.

And yet a joy had been hers that night which had made her tired heart beat as if it were young again. She came out on the edge of the wood, and suddenly against the gray of the morning shone a clear, white star, its radiance like one speaking to her.

The Elder, whom she had left in the house on the hill, came on with that quick step of his, like the pad of a fox over brush. "The bright and morning star," he said. "John could find nothing more fit for deity. 'I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star.' It is like a Presence. Was the night so very desperate?" he asked then, gently, as she made no reply.

"Might 'a' be'n wuss," she answered. She stooped to pluck a late white violet. "I did n't see that blow," she said, "but I sort o' sense 'em, out o' my yarb-gath'rin'." She went on a little way in silence. "There!" she broke forth at last, "I've said so much to ye, Elder, that day ye was a-makin' my last will an' testymunt, that it 's no use pertendin' now. I did n't know it myself, anyways. O' course it was

plain to a child w'at Jerry 'd growed ter be. An' I thought I 'd done 'ith carin' fer w'at he was wunst, or w'at I 'd thought he was. But somehow, somewheres, way underneath, I s'pose, there must 'a' be'n a feelin', a hope, all unbeknownst ter me, covered up by the dust o' years, that the old Jerry was still there, the Jerry that thought I was in the counsels o' the Lord. I did n't know I expected — but seems I did — that come ter the eend he 'd speak my name — sort o' summons me ter meet him over beyond. He did n't. He ses, 'Eunice, my wife.' Ses it over an' over. She that was the ruinin' of him, 'ith her pretty face an' her shif'less slackness. Made so — like a bird of the air. 'Eunice,' he ses. He was fur gone. He did n't rekernize me. Did n't know me fum the side o' the house. 'She 's be'n sent fer,' I ses. 'Who be you?' he ast, lookin' at me 'ith them wide, wanderin' eyes o' his'n that never seemed ter see nothin' nowadays, an' that in old times useter look a'most inter heaven. 'Who be you?' he ast. 'Mahaly,' ses I. 'Mahaly who?' ses he. Jest a w'isper. Hardly stren'th fer that. Think of it, Elder! 'Mahaly who?' An' wunst he all but breathed through me. Wunst I 'd be'n his life an' soul. But when he 'd merried Eunice he never seemed ter hev eyther life or soul. She hed n't wanted his eyes ter look inter heaven. Ses he then, 'Whoever ye be, raise me up! Ye 're powerfle. Keep me alive tell Eunice comes. Ye can, can't ye? Fer God's sake,

du!' Wal, I 'd run up the minute I 'd heered how 't was 'ith him; an' I 'd fetched the drops I 'd put up years ago, fer extreme cases, the stronges' an' subtles' I 'd ever made, 'stilled an' 'stilled ag'in. I measured him ten drops, an' then twenty, an' then a teaspoonfle. An' I see the flush come inter his face nateral, an' felt his pulse slow down an' git stiddy. An' then he ses, quite strong, 'You — ye make me so comf'table — so comf'table. God bless ye! Seem 's ef I could breathe easy — feel 's ef I was made over new. I — I don't b'lieve but w'at I 'll win thru.' He looked up, his eyes all fevered an' shinin'. 'You, Eunice?' he ses. An' then, lookin' straight at me, he all to wunst begun ter count — millions — billions — trillions — way up to nonillions — decillions — an' he was gone. Fer a minute, w'en he ses, 'you, Eunice?' I did n't know but I was all ter him that Eunice was, seein' he did n't know the diff'runce. He never knowed she war n't nothin'. An' I come away an' lef' you in the other room 'ith the rest on 'em. I 'd liketer stayed an' comforted Euny, Reuel Asher's Euny. She loved her pa jes' becos he was so useless. But I — I needed the dark of all outdoors. I s'pose by ter-morrer I 'll see w'at a fool I be. But jes' ter-night it seems 's ef everythin' hed come ter an eend upstandin'. Ef I 'd 'a' be'n merried I prob'bly should n't 'a' fooled much 'ith my still, an' so I should n't 'a' hed them drops thet tided him over the dark waters so com-

f'table. I do' know but I 'd ruther hed that granted me — as 't was — than be'n given years o' heart's desire. There 's where some joy comes in. I give him the last comfort, the last plaisure, he hed in his life. An' that 's w'at that bright an' mornin' star hed ter say to me. Jes' ter put me in mind. See, it 's a-fallin' back amongst the pink an' yaller every-day clouds. It 's said its say. Dear Lord in Heaven, it 's another day, an' I 'm alive on this 'arth an' Jerry gone! — Goin' hum ter hev a good sleep? Ye need it, Elder."

"And you, too, Miss Mahala."

"I don't b'lieve I 'll git ter sleep ter-day."

"You mean you will be living over in the further life — Is it best?"

"I s'pose he ain't hardly wuth follerin'. But ef I don't, nobody will. I would n't 'a' dreamt it of me! Wal, anyways, I gotter be busy. I promised old lady Hill I 'd fetch her some essence o' spearmint — she 's kind o' spindlin' — an' it 's jes' ready fer geth'rin' 'ith the mornin'-dew on it." She was silent a little space, disentangling her gown from a wild raspberry vine that ran out to clutch it. And then, as she went on, she said, "Billions — trillions — nonillions. I larned 'em to him. He must 'a' reely knowed 't was me — "

"Nonillions — decillions — " said the Elder. "Don't you see? He was among infinite numbers — infinite things."

"Infinite thin's. You allers do say the right word, Elder!" And then, their paths dividing, Miss Mahala picked up her skirts, and went on alone through the drenching and shining dew.

Presently she was aware of another companionship; and looking down she saw Zip, with an eye and an ear cocked up at her, doubtful but determined. She stooped to lay her hand on his little rough head. "Oh, Zip," she said, "you 're on'y a little mongrel yaller dog — but w'at a comfort ye be!"

MISS MAHALA AND JOHNNY

XIV

Miss Mahala and Johnny

I DO not defend Miss Mahala. I hope it is understood that I do not defend her.

But all the same, I never had any sympathy with the Jeanie Deans sort of people who would risk their sisters' lives rather than their own little paltering souls.

Miss Mahala had great sorrows in her life; she had also had great and troublous joys. But now her interests were reduced to such as she found in a general oversight of the Settlement. She did not regard herself as Elder Perry's coadjutor, but she filled much the same office, as the Elder was wont to remark to his wife. When he first came to the scattered parish she instructed him in the varying idiosyncrasies there; and ever since she had been not only his curate, but his conscience. He learned to know his people and love them every one, but Miss Mahala knew their fathers and their grandfathers, had seen most of them the day they were born, and could tell to a nicety what strains of inheritance they carried and what might be expected of them. She had been down in Salt Water when the Elder married his wife there, and she knew of certain things in Mrs. Perry's ancestry that probably Mrs. Perry did not know herself; and when the Perry children came into the world

one after another, Miss Mahala had vivid apprehensions, only quieted by the thought of Mrs. Perry's angelic personality. And yet she knew that a many-colored ray may fall through a crystal and leave it white and limpid as spring water. However, life with the Elder might have nullified all the colored ray, she fancied. Yet she watched Una and St. John and Luke and Steve and the twins and at last little Peace with an anxiety that would have disturbed their father and mother had they known of it.

Miss Mahala's worst fears began to be confirmed when one day she found St. John Perry red-handed, or rather green-handed, in her herb-garden, the plot of ground where grew her dill and savory and sweet basil and lavender and thyme and their congeners, many of which she had brought in from wood and field, and nurtured, and which she gathered and sold, or from which she incanted simples to be administered to those in need of them.

What was Johnny Perry doing in her garden? The answer was here. Both of his hands were full of her precious mint — that mint which was to have been distilled into extract and oil, but which lads liked to chew, and the possession of which was a kind of wealth. And her pennyroyal, moreover, to be smoked in old corncobs behind the barn! You may be sure the surprised Johnny was dealt with, and stripped of his spoils that they might he thrown into Miss Mahala's small still. But presently she softened.

Poor little lad! she thought; he was no worse than other boys. What boy would n't take a sprig of pennyroyal if he came across it! She called after him and gave him back the treasure; and proud and happy he went off, feeling, after all, an honest boy, and ready to trade with boys less fortunate. "Jes' thin's that grow in the fields, free to all," said Johnny to himself.

The incident remained in Miss Mahala's inner consciousness, but without much emphasis. It was restored to life, however, when one August afternoon, a year later, she saw St. John Perry under the August pippin-tree, his pockets bulging and his hat full of the delicious yellow spheres.

"Johnny! Ag'in!" she cried.

"I ain't never took any before. I thought you 'd jest as lieves I hed one o' yer apples," whimpered Johnny.

"So I would if you ast," she replied. "How many you took?"

Johnny showed his hat.

"That all?"

Johnny nodded.

"Turn your pockets out."

Johnny squirmed; but Miss Mahala's hand was a compelling one. Pockets and the bulge of his jacket brought to light a dozen pippins.

"You come into the house with me!"

Johnny squirmed again; but Miss Mahala's eye was as compelling as her hand.

"I didn't know you was a thief, Johnny," said Miss Mahala sadly.

"I ain't," said Johnny.

"An' an impenitent thief at that. Do you know what became of the impenitent thief?"

"I don't care! He wouldn't let me hev any!"

"Who? The impenitent thief?"

"I mean daddy wouldn't. He wouldn't let me hev one of the sweetings."

"They ain't ripe. They'll be better eatin' come a week after ter-morrow."

"He won't give me any then They're fer sick folks, he says."

"Your father's a presidin' elder, an' it ain't fit an' proper fer you to call him 'he' that way."

"You mean I should call him 'she,' Miss Mahaly?" asked Johnny, lifting his great, innocent-looking blue eyes, and quite willing to change the question.

"I 'm afraid you're a bad boy, St. John."

"P'r'aps I be," said St. John indifferently.

"St. John Perry, do you want to break yer father's heart?"

Johnny looked up incredulously. "Does it hurt?" he asked.

"Hurt? It kills!"

Miss Mahala was not sure that Johnny's lip quivered. "I s'pose you know," she said, "you, a parson's son, that it 's wrong to steal?"

"Do' know 's I do," Johnny replied. "'Ith so much talk about what 's right an' what ain't, a feller gits mixed up."

"St. John, it 's bad enough to steal. Don't add a lie to it. That 's wuss."

"Wuss to lie?" asked St. John.

"It upsets the balance o' thin's. The Lord might fergive ye fer hankerin' an' helpin' yerself, but a lie 's jes' contradictin' Him to His face."

"That so?" said Johnny, a trifle startled, but with an impartial air.

"There ain't no circumstances can excuse a lie," said Miss Mahala.

"You don't say so," said Johnny.

"I 'm afraid you 're a bad boy, St. John Perry!" she repeated.

"Mebbe," said St. John.

"I did n't tell yer father when I found ye in my yarb-garden —"

"Them greens!"

"Them greens is property, an' you was takin' 'em. But now — you 're his flesh an' blood — he may know how to deal 'ith you. I don't."

"'T won't matter. Daddy never licks us."

"He 'd orter."

"Ef he did, I 'd run away!"

"Sho!"

"I 'd jest as lieves, Miss Mahaly," said Johnny, twirling his empty hat, "you did n't tell on me to ma."

"I won't," said Miss Mahala. "I won't give her such a sorrer — the sweet soul!" She took her big Bible from the shelf; her own little Bible for daily use was in her bedroom. She turned the leaves over for a text she wanted. Every here and there was a dollar bill laid between the leaves. Johnny's eyes sparkled as he caught sight of them. Suddenly she shut the book. She did not know exactly the text to fit the crime. The boy would not care for the thunders and lightnings of Sinai, the noise of the trumpet, or the smoke of the mountain. "You can take the apples, St. John," she said.

But St. John left the apples and went his way up the hill to young Jerry. Miss Mahala gazed after him with misery as he disappeared. The sweet shadows of the green wood, the dancing flickers of sunshine, and the soaring blue above, all seemed a mockery when she thought of the child of her friend with a heart-breaking taint in his blood. There was no sun on the tossing boughs for her, no balm in the breeze. In a dreary mood, waiting for no luncheon, she tied on her bonnet and sought the Elder. She met him at the halfway rock; his wife had sent him with some junket for an ailing person, junket being an inexpensive delicacy when you owned your cow — and the Elder loved it for the sake of John Milton. There had been a little dispute in the Elder's mind as to the naming of his first son, but finally St. John had got the better of John Milton.

The Elder was resting now on the moss-grown boulder, looking up as if his gaze could penetrate distances of sky. She hesitated; but there was no use beating about the bush. Reverie or prayer, she must disturb it, her gloom darkening the bright summer day.

"Elder," she said abruptly, "I think you gotter deal 'ith your St. John."

"Deal with — eh — who — what — with my St. John?" said the Elder, lowering his gaze to Miss Mahala's shawl — Miss Mahala would have held it an immodesty to go out without her shawl, even in the tropics.

"With your Johnny," she said firmly.

"What 's the matter with Johnny?" he asked gayly. "Why, he 's good as gold."

"Gold had orter be tried."

"Why, Miss Mahala, what are you talking about?"

"I hate ter tell ye, Elder. I hate it like p'ison. But you gotter look out fer Johnny. I feel es bad es ef he was my own," she stammered. "But fust you promise not to say a word to Mis' Perry — I can't hev her feelin's teched."

"Promise? All right. No matter about *my* feelings, I see."

"'T aint no laughin' matter, Elder. Johnny — he — he 's — I 've found him twicet takin' thin's 't warn't his'n." Miss Mahala's voice was trembling, and everything was going black before her eyes.

"Oh, I guess not, Miss Mahala," the Elder said.

"There ain't any guess to it, sir. Fac's is fac's. Johnny is light-fingered." And then Miss Mahala sank on the grass and closed her eyes. It had been no easy matter for her to tell the Elder standing at the gates of heaven that his son was a thief.

The Elder tore off a big sassafras leaf and hurried with water from the spring. He understood the ordeal it had been to her, although, of course, it was quite nonsensical. "There," he said, when the color had returned to her face, "now I 'll see you home. And don't give Master St. John another thought. I 'll attend to him. I 've stolen green apples myself in my time."

"You have, Elder? That 's a comfort. P'r'aps Johnny 'll come out all right, then. But you must keep your weather-eye open for him, Elder. Home 'ith me? Ef Mahaly Brooks can't walk home alone she 'd better die here! You go along. You 've got work afore ye."

But that evening, as the Elder sat among his children and saw St. John, with little Peace in his arms and the other children about him like flies about a fallen plum while he told them a Bible story with many embellishments, the Elder listened a moment.

"That is hardly true, my son," he said.

"But don't you wish it was, pa?" asked Johnny.

"Wish anything in the Bible different?" exclaimed his father.

"Why not? Yes. I'd like to play Sundays. I'd like to take anything I wanted, no matter whose it was before."

"My son! St. John! Would you steal?"

"'T would n't be stealin' if 't warn't fer the Commandments," said the perspicacious Johnny.

And the Elder, more concerned with a fear of infidelity in Johnny than of anything else, forgot about the danger of dishonesty in his prayer and his endeavor to make the Lord seem a living person to his little hearers. There was a matter of disciplining a member for loose thinking and light talking that troubled the Elder just then, and he forgot about Johnny, so to say. Only his heart always gave a tender throb when he saw Johnny go whistling down the road, his hands in his pockets and his often crownless hat on the back of his bright curls, the picture of blue-eyed innocence; the joy of Luke and Steve and the twins, who tagged after him through heat and dust, the almoner to little Peace of black raspberries and sweet-flag root, the comfort of Una with bits of spruce gum, translucent and sweet as drops of honey. Miss Mahala herself had once said that if ever there was a lovable rascal it was Johnny Perry.

But seasons fled in sun and shade, and Johnny was a big boy past fourteen. His voice was not changed; he could still sing "The spacious firmament on high" like a flute, like a young angel. But

he was much pleased with a faint down upon his upper lip; it gave him a dream of the time when he should go out West and take up six hundred and forty acres of land to be had for the asking. He was quite too big to be whipped; Miss Mahala, keeping an eye upon him, felt this a pity. There were times when Johnny was playing some rogue's trick that her fingers tingled; as when he drew lurid flames with ocher and vermilion on the side of the shed that made little Pearl Asher afraid to go to bed.

But it was quite a way across the woods, and Johnny was not often in evidence at Miss Mahala's. She was surprised one morning, when, coming home from a walk with Pharaoh in search of catnip, she saw her door open, and St. John Perry standing there with her Bible in his hands.

"What are you doing here, St. John?" she said severely.

"Your Bible 's full o' money," he replied, if not with much relevancy.

"What of that?"

"I heered daddy tellin' ma, when he thought I was out o' the way, that you wanted to give it to him in your will, an' he would n't let you. An' a dollar bill between every leaf! An' I thought I 'd jes' look out fer ma."

"I ain't dead yet," said Miss Mahala.

"What difference 'd that make?" asked Johnny.

"Consid'rable — to me," said Miss Mahala,

taking the book. "I was hopin', Johnny, that you 'd outgrowed yer badness. That you 'd left off stealin'."

"I warn't stealin'," said Johnny. "I was jes' a-takin' what you give pa an' he would n't take — takin' it fer ma."

"St. John Perry, I reely think you must be wantin'!"

"I be. I 'm wantin' money fer ma."

"Then go to work and earn it! Johnny, don't you know it 's wicked to steal?"

"Yes'm."

"Why?"

"'Cause 't is."

"Wal, p'r'aps that 's so," said Miss Mahala, with an unformulated thought of the immutability of right and wrong. "Johnny, who made you?" she asked.

"My sponsors in baptism," Johnny answered.

"Oh, what a wicked boy you be!"

"You 've said so afore."

"Ef you 'd ever hed a change o' heart them sponsors *might* 'a' be'n the makin' on ye, in one sense. As it is, wal, I take a good deal o' blame to myself fer not follerin' ye up closer."

"I should think you 'd done yer duty," said Johnny nonchalantly.

She sat down on the doorstep and motioned him to a seat beside her. She was biting a sprig of penny-

royal; she offered one to him; he accepted it indifferently. Pharaoh came and purred round them; Johnny bent and smoothed the cat's head. Perhaps it seemed a profane touch to Miss Mahala; she took the cat and shut him in an inner room. Then she came back and resumed her seat.

"Oh, what a pretty day it is!" she sighed presently.

As that was self-evident, it perhaps required no answer. It received none.

"There 's nothin' like the sky," said Miss Mahala, after another moment. "Nothin' so handsome. Cheerful, tew. What ef God had set out to make it green; would n't that 'a' be'n a dreary world! And ef He 'd made the sky red — I do' know what 'd 'a' happened. But blue — it 's jes' the color o' heaven."

"I do' know nothin' about heaven," said Johnny.

"Puffeckly true. You don't. I useter hear it said, 'A minister's son and a deacon's daughter gener'ly do es they hed n't orter.' "

Johnny apparently did n't think it was up to him to prove the fallacy of the distich. Miss Mahala went on biting her pennyroyal leaf. "I often think," she said, after a short interval, "how many idees the Lord must 'a' hed in His mind when He thought out an' made all the flowers."

This did not seem to affect Johnny.

"You 're fond o' flowers, ain't ye, Johnny?"

"Some," said Johnny.

"I heered say you 'd like ter be a gardinger w'en ye growed up."

Johnny showed a spark of interest. "Would n't I!" said he.

"You can't be a gardinger, o' course, or hev any flowers, eyther, ef you was in state's prison."

"Look here, Miss Mahaly, you can't frighten me with your state's prisons!"

"Why would I want to frighten you? Ef the love o' the Lord that giv' ye this beautifle world ter live in, that giv' ye your father an' mother an' little Peace, won't keep ye straight, state's prison won't eyther. But ef I don't tell on ye now, I 'm compoundin' of a felony an' liable to state's prison myself, an' I 'm pesky fond o' flowers, an' 'd miss my yarb-garding dredfly."

"Tha' so!" said Johnny.

"Talkin' o' flowers, there 's a little one in a tumbler in there that I picked off 'n Sonny's grave, ye know — the little boy that died. I was goin' ter take it up ter yer mother, she bein' too lame to come down jes' yit, but you may as well, w'en you go."

Johnny turned his head, and the color mounted his face.

"I don't persume you mind how yer father took on when that dear child died?"

Johnny remembered; at least he nodded.

"I s'pose he 'd ruther the child died than lived ter go to state's prison. I s'pose he 'd ruther you

died yerself, much as he sets by ye, than know you was in state's prison wearin' stripes," she said reflectively.

"I ain't goin' to no state's prison!" he cried suddenly.

"You? How do you know? One step leads to another in wrong-doin'. You never know where you 'll land. I don't know where I 'll fetch up myself. It 's dredfle dismal an' gloomy shet up in prison, an' hard work, reel hard work, an' bread an' water to eat, an' wearin' stripes roundabout instead of up an' down — it — it 's awfle!" And Miss Mahala shuddered, perhaps at the picture of the stripes. "St. John Perry won't sound well on the prison-roll; St. John won't."

"I ain't afraid," said St. John Perry.

"You 'd better be, unless you turn a short corner. How do you s'pose you come by the name?"

"The beloved disciple," said Johnny shortly.

"An' your father wanted you to be beloved so, too. But of course — Wal, Mahaly ain't much of a name — kind of a breath — but ef I was named St. John I 'd try an' live up to it. 'T would 'a' be'n fust-rate ef by an' by the Lord could n't 'a' told which St. John He loved the most. You mind the night little Peace was born, an' your mother sent fer you an' told you she was yourn an' you 'd gotter look out fer her all her life? A person that 's doin' time behind four walls can't look out fer any

one. How bad Peace would feel, the dear, pretty creetur, all disgraced by her brother, an' she lovin' ye an' b'lievin' in ye so. Yes, yer mother give her to ye; you was allers yer mother's favoright. When the little boy died she turned to you. 'I 've got Johnny,' she said. 'Ef Johnny is spared to me, I won't repine,' she said. You was her first-born. She 's a reel tender heart. I s'pose she 'd jes' break down an' fade away —"

And then Johnny fell to crying and hiding his face in his sleeve. "Miss Mahaly," he blubbered, "I won't ever take anythin' ag'in that don't belong to me. I won't ever tell a lie. I'll be good — oh, I'll be good!" And Miss Mahala took him in her arms and cried too.

There was a long silence. A thrush thought it too long and broke it with a bubble of pure music.

"Miss Mahaly," said Johnny, "I feel as if I 'd j'ined the church."

"You hev, St. John," she said. "The reel church. But you don't know it yet."

There were some other things they spoke of as they sat there in the long summer morning. It came out that Johnny felt it to be a miracle when the first blades of the harvest put their green tips above ground; that he would like to work such miracles himself; that farming appealed to him. And it was a fortunate coincidence that Miss Mahala had an outlying farm that had run to waste, and Miss Ma-

hala wanted some one to take an interest in it, and Johnny was bubbling with interest. They spoke of other things, among them of the robbery of David's money-drawer at the Corners.

"It warn't me," said Johnny. "You b'lieve me? 'T warn't me."

"I believe you," said Miss Mahala.

By and by he went, carrying, besides the little flower, an accumulation of dimes that Miss Mahala had been keeping in the sugar-bowl, and which she insisted on pouring into his pockets in spite of his manful protest. He came back, after starting to go, and kissed Miss Mahala's brown and withered cheek.

It was a week or so afterward that the Elder came slowly through the wood, walking as if he carried a load on his shoulders, and unlatched Miss Mahala's gate. She ran to meet him.

"It 's too pleasant for indoors," she said. "We 'll visit here" — and they sat down on the doorstep together.

"One place is as pleasant as another," the Elder sighed.

"You 're lookin' tired, Elder," she said. "Kind o' peaked. You jes' wait till I git you some o' my wild cherry —"

"No, no, I don't want it, thank you. I —"

"But you must have suthin', Elder. An egg beat up 'ith a sip o' old cider."

"No, Miss Mahala, no." And then there was silence. Miss Mahala waited; and at last the Elder roused himself.

"I've come to you in some trouble of mind," he said. "I may say in great distress. I have been preparing a discourse on the substance of things hoped for, and have been so occupied — for it is a most pleasant subject of consideration — that I have perhaps neglected my duty and have suffered the children to go too much unwatched during Mrs. Perry's lameness. Not long since I found them in possession of various pieces of silver. Pieces of silver have wrought great mischief in this world. On inquiry I found that my St. John had given them. I was startled. We are not in the habit of having money." The Elder was looking straight before him, speaking in a low and husky voice. "A conversation I once had with you suddenly recurred to me — oh, like a stab — and as it happened," he continued, "I met Deacon Asher, who mentioned to me the robbery of David's till at the Corners. A great loss to poor David. Miss Mahala," turning on her sharply, "where do you suppose St. John got those pieces of silver?"

"I give 'em to him," said Miss Mahala. "Anythin' else troublin' ye?"

"Yes, Miss Mahala, that, indeed, is a relief; yet when you told me one day, as I was resting on the halfway stone, that my Johnny was — I — can't say

the word —" He stopped as if expecting her to supply it.

"Ef you can't say it I can't think it, Elder," she said.

"It came back to me this morning," he resumed; "all you said, as I waked. It came like a thunderstroke. I — I felt crushed to earth. If my boy is — is a thief —" The Elder choked at the word. "Why, it is impossible! His mother's son can't go wrong! His mother has the whitest soul this side of heaven."

"That 's true, Elder."

"But if — if he is, I had better not have lived. My work is a failure. But that is no matter, in comparison. My son, my poor young son — I would rather it had been I myself than that child. When you told me Johnny was — was light-fingered —" The Elder whispered the word.

"I! I told you that!"

"Certainly. You told me, you remember, that you found him stealing your herbs and your apples, but at the time I was so greatly caught up in the spirit over the way out of a great trouble in the parish that it seemed to me then too small to notice, if you will excuse me, Miss Mahala. I thought I knew my St. John, and the impossibility of his going very wrong; and when you said I must look out for him, for he was light-fingered, I half thought — you know you fainted — that instead of his being light-

fingered you were a little light-headed, and I went my way and forgot about it; God forgive me — "

"Es ef there ever was a boy of any sperrit that did n't steal green apples when he lived where they growed, sence the days of Adam and Eve!" exclaimed Miss Mahala. "But as for your Johnny, ef it 's him you mean, why, he 's as honest es you be, and is goin' ter live an upright life." She was trembling like a leaf.

"Then what did you mean — "

"Elder, I don't know what you 're a-talkin' of!"

"I am speaking of what you said to me out there that day by the halfway stone, and as I remembered it this morning, having seen the dimes, and having heard of the robbery of David's till — "

"Elder, I don't know what ter make of you. Ain't you be'n dreamin'? Air — air you disturbed in your mind?"

"Miss Mahala, I 'm broken-hearted."

"It does beat all! You must 'a' be'n dreamin' a regular nightmare."

She turned and looked him in the face. She felt as if the heavens were falling. A little bird whistling in the cedar seemed an evil spirit addressing her.

"Elder," said Miss Mahala, solemnly, "look a-here! I ain't ever see you at the halfway stun, nor hed any conversation 'ith ye about St. John, nor

ever told ye anythin' about yarbs or apples, or ter look out fer Johnny, or that he was light-fingered. There! An' I ain't ever fainted away in my life. I sh'd thought you *would* 'a' said I was light-headed!"

Miss Mahala was white under all her tan; but the Elder, in a maze, was not looking at her now.

"You 've be'n dreamin'," she continued. "Some dreams is like live thin's. Or the Evil One 's be'n a-whisperin' in your ear. You 're tew busy, you 're what they call overworked an' het up. You 're jes' needin' me ter fix up some o' my spring bitters fer ye—"

"Miss Mahala! Are you in earnest?"

"Cert'in I be."

"I can't credit it. I can't admit it. It is perfectly real in my recollection—"

"That 's the way with them strong kind o' dreams."

"But I 'm not a dreaming man."

"An' so all the more when ye do dream it seems reel. I dessay you 'll say I hed on a green shawl—"

"You did."

"Wal, I ain't got any green shawl! Dreams is queer thin's."

"Miss Mahala, if this is all true, it would be a mountain off my mind and soul."

"True! I don't s'pose you 're a-doubtin' of my

word? Anybody in this perrish 'll tell ye Mahaly Brooks never telled a lie — afore!"

Miss Mahala's voice was raised a little, for as she spoke she was wondering how much logwood it would take to dye a green garment black, the heightened tone an unconscious veil to her thought. But it was convincing.

The Elder stood up and reached his arms to heaven. "I thank God! I thank God!" he said. And then he turned to Miss Mahala with some of the blue fire of that heaven in his eye and an ineffable sweetness in his smile. If she quailed the least in the world, he did not perceive it. "You have made me another man," he said, taking his seat again on the doorstep. "And now, if you don't mind, I think an egg whipped up in old cider would be very refreshing to that other man."

"I 'll hev one, tew," she said, as she went in. "I don't need the cider," she added to herself. "I s'pose it 's wrong. But I 'm on the downward course, anyway."

"Why, Elder," she said, when she returned with the concoction, "ain't Johnny telled ye? Wal, he ain't hardly hed time. He 's goin' to the Aggerculteral College in a year or so. I 'm sendin' him — you an' Mis' Perry agreein'. I've got the means. An' then he 's ter hev this ol' farm o' mine thet 's run to waste this twenty year."

The Elder walked home on air.

Miss Mahala went into her room and shut the door. She knelt down beside her bed. But she could pray no prayer. She was bitter at heart, but she was not sorry. The Lord must forgive her. Some day He would!

THE END

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